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THE ROUA PASS;

OR,

ENGLISHMEN IN THE HIGHLANDS.

BY

ERICK MACKENZIE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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THE ROUA PASS; OR, ENGLISHMEN IN THE HIGHLANDS.

CHAPTER I.

ENGLISH SPORTSMEN.

It's no in titles nor in rank,
It's no in wealth like Lon'on Bank,
To purchase peace and rest.

.....
Nae treasures nor pleasures
Could make us happy lang ;
The heart ay's the part ay
That makes us right or wrang. BURNS.

THE English lessee of the shooting of Dreumah had arrived in the Highlands three days ere the 12th of August, accompanied by his two friends.

It was a shooting which in extent and wild-

ness ranked as one of the best in the Highlands, being inhabited by every prized species, from the high-ranging Ptarmigan to the far-ranging Red Deer, and brought a rent commensurate with the sport it afforded, and with that wealth which only epicurean Englishmen are willing to lavish on this exciting enjoyment.

The lodge, a small grey stone building, stood on a platform of heather closely surrounded by high mountains; which, in their desolate grandeur, shut it in from all more outward view; showing, in summer, but the play of light and shadow on the many coloured rock—the glaring sun sending down its rays with fiery fervour; and, in winter, only dreary heights sheeted with snow, seeming as if threatening to crush in upon the lonely gaze of the prisoned keeper of the place. There appeared to be neither egress from nor approach to it; though a track did lead to it, branching from the parliamentary road about a mile to the west, and winding in a zig-zag pass through the mountain chain until it abruptly ceased at this heather-clad opening.

The wild country beyond was wholly unmarked by human foot tread. The sportsmen and the shepherds tracked their way by nobler signs. There, on the blue horizon, stood the blasted trunks of a pine forest, looking on moonlight nights like a battle field of gigantic skeletons, or a fearful group of clans,—Ossian's mighty men—arrested by one death stroke in their attitudes of strife.

The father mountain of Dreumah—that is to say, the mountain which based the lodge flat, was so peculiarly peaked that it might have served as a landmark to the Lowlands. The crowning rocks were fantastically heaped like an upraised cross ; and probably Saint Columba himself, struck with the similitude, had given it its name, when wandering in this part of the Highlands more than twelve hundred years ago ; for since then it has been called Craigchrisht.

Behind the lodge ran a brawling river, rushing ceaselessly, with many a fall from the glens beyond, towards the large loch of Nchtach. On the brink of the river stood a detached shedding

of tarred wood, the habitation of forty dogs and twenty gillies. They were kennelled here, out of hearing of the lodge tenants; English dogs and Highland dependants living together in happy unanimity, enjoying a mingled life of work and ease, and ready to start at the bidding of their masters.

The English sportsmen were still seated at the breakfast table in the general sitting-room of the small lodge of Dreumah. Small, indeed, was that little tenement in comparison with the vast territory to which its tenancy gave the sporting right; and marvellous in the eyes of olden folk were the changes of time and fashion which had caused that right, so little valued in their young days, now to bring an income doubled to the laird. The puir silly grouse and the red deer of the hills were now become the props of the rental; their lives being valuable, their comfort was heeded: no ejectments for them!

Times were changed. In the days of the olden lairds the wild birds and the beasts be-

longed to the faithful clansmen and the tenants : he who ran might shoot. The venison was for the snowy days of winter, when goodly haunches might hang on every bothie's* rafters. Who was asked to pay for the peats that smoked it, then, or for the heather grass that fattened it? Aye, not a grandfather amongst them but might remember those days, and turn to curse the change ; seeing in it but a barter of themselves with the beasts : war created, and which to win ? The people and the beasts had reigned an equal length of days—from time immemorial ; but the beasts were subservient : the people stood next to the laird in those days : they fought and bled for him. In the very, very old days, it was they who kept his lands for him in spite of the Sassenachs ;—but now, the Sassenachs, who never could have won the land by their blood, could win it by their gold ; and the lairds took their gold, and sold or exterminated their people. The times were changed !

* Rude turf hut.

The sitting-room of the lodge was about to be vacated; the three gentlemen had risen from breakfast and were in discussion over their plans for the day. It was a small square room furnished with rigorous simplicity, and lighted by two curtainless windows at one end; a black hair sofa was drawn along the wall, opposite to the hearth, where a huge turf fire blazed; a heavy table was in the middle, on which lay a pile of newspapers, books, and cigars; wooden arm chairs of comfortable shapes stood about; and on the side where the door of egress opened were several shelves laden with desks, game cards, quaighs,* flasks, etc.

On the opposite side were three small doors, half shut; a legible B. No. 1, B. No. 2, B. No. 3, showed their occupation as bedrooms. Into one of these Basil Harold, the youngest man of the Dreumah party, now entered, whistling: he was impatient to get out and be off. It was a room of cell-like proportions, sufficing to contain a

* Small drinking cups.

chair or two and a large bath. The bed, long and narrow, was fixed in a recess of the wall, and curtained. Shelves, reaching from above the pillow to the ceiling, held all the necessaries of a shooting-lodge toilette. The washing stand was built into the wall; pipes of icy water from a hill spring being introduced, to save space and chambermaid labour. The looking glass, dressing-case, etc., stood on a broad slab of slate, which also formed the sill of the window. All three bedrooms were planned and furnished exactly alike.

Basil Harold dived his hand into the pocket of a grey shooting jacket, which hung by a superb dressing-gown of wadded satin on two brass nails behind the door, and taking out a cigar case and a book, transferred them to the pocket of the coat he wore; then slinging on his shooting apparatus, he rejoined his friends. He was the tallest man of the party—rather reserved in manner, and grave for his years, which numbered only six-and-twenty; but with a certain dreaminess of eye and a quiet humourous smile, which struck the

fancy. He had soft blue eyes and thick brown hair, and there was an air about him that interested more than many a classically perfect form and figure. His feet and hands were rather large, but well shaped, and his mouth also carried birth in the chiselled upper lip: certainly pride and self-control were clearly traceable there.

One could not be long in Basil Harold's society without feeling that honesty of purpose and purity of mind were innate qualities;—they shone in him. The womanly care which had guarded and guided him until his tenth year, had cultivated good principles never to be exterminated. He had been, as a boy, gentle, loving, and beloved; he had never been cruel, or a liar, or a thief (and boys in the higher classes may exemplify these vices quite as much as in the lower): mind and body were strong and healthy. He went to Eton, where he developed a manly spirit, and having self-reliance, was inferior to none: he was happy there, and when he left cried “*Floreat Etona*” with all his heart. On leaving Oxford, he went abroad for a couple of

years with his friend Sir Francis Thornton ; who quite foresaw the beginning of a very bright future for Basil. Harold's hall lay ready for his return —that fine old place, where all the social duties and pleasures of life for him were centred ; and with the fresh vigour of unwasted youth, he had already, asking God's blessing, began the happy performance of them.

The other men were seated on opposite sides of the blazing fire when he re-entered. Edward Herbert Auber, who was lighting his cigar at a bit of glowing turf, was a slight-made man of five or six and thirty, with a pale complexion, soft dark eyes, and hair of silky ebon black. His manners were bland and earnest, with a smile of variable expression and perfect beauty.

Where was there a more fascinating companion than Auber ? He had travelled, was accomplished, and so complete a master of his own language, that through its tones, skilfully modulated, he could reach the hearts and minds of others. His temper was perfect : no contrary tastes or opinions could embitter his own ; for he

smiled admiringly at the rhapsodies of one friend, and pleasantly when another was helped twice to soup. His patience was never tired ;—not even when Marchmoram forced him to ascend Stronichie at a goat's pace. He enjoyed life at all times and all seasons : he knew London, and had seen its life in all its phases ; and he knew the world.

On the moor, Marchmoram's active step was always slightly ahead of Auber ; his quick and energetic voice keeping pace, either in animated conversation, or in commands to the keepers, who were always more ready to hear and obey his orders than those of either the polished Auber or good-humoured Harold. There is no doubt that a man who combines a powerful frame with a force intellectual has an influence over all inferiors, from menials even to the brute creation. But of Marchmoram's mind we shall know more anon.

His face and figure were, like it, strong and peculiar ; with traits of good and evil. His hair was rich chesnut colour, and of exquisitely fine

texture ; all women admired it. His eyes were literally the light of his countenance ; for, when cast down in one of those absent moods he was subject to, darkness came over their expression. They were eyes of hawkish brown—a colour that deepened almost to blackness with rage, and softened with love. When excited—and he was fearfully excitable—they lighted into strange fire : you felt it was his brain that sent those burning flashes through his eyes, and their wild light would enkindle in your own soul congenial sympathy. The fire of life burnt strongly in him, whether openly or subdued. When in one of his silent moods, there was as much difference in that brooding quietude of his from the *laissez aller* of Auber's self-indulgent ease, as between the outward quiet of a deep-buried mine and the sleeping darkness of a sea-shore cavern.

Marchmoram's face might have been handsome, but for that critical feature, the mouth : the index of character. It was an ugly, an unloveable mouth. The lips were thin, red, and firm, and sometimes drawn ascetically : smiles

sardonic, sarcastic, satanic, and seraphic wreathed them by turns. You gazed on the brow—it was high, wide, and massive: intellect sat firm upon it: no personal fatigue could dull the keen mental energies.

His figure was more strongly than finely proportioned; being rather too muscular, but well adapted for the manly exercises of walking, running, rowing, and riding, in all of which he excelled. He had many friends, but had made some enemies. He wanted the studied self-control, the polished forbearance of Auber. Where he despised he showed it: and this was somewhat often. He had just briefly announced to Auber his intention of not shooting that day, as Harold entered.

“ The flat of Bohr’dell does not suit me! I shall walk to the post by and bye, and bring back a report of the game on Lochandu.”

Auber shrugged his shoulders in reply, and walked to the window.

“ Well, the grouse have crowed too long for me this morning,” exclaimed Harold, seizing his

cap, and striding towards the door. "I am off! and, Auber, if you want the scent to keep as it does now, you should be on Stronichie in half an hour. Shall I call Ralph?"

"The wind may blow where it listeth for me, my good fellow," replied Auber, putting his head out of the window. "I must have another fortnight in this bracing climate before my energies will match yours. If I don't find the stag to-day, I shan't sleep less soundly to-night. But be so kind as to send Thorold here, if you see him."

"Not going out!" exclaimed Marchmoram, as Harold left the room. "I would have taken the pass myself, had I known this, Herbert."

"But I am going," Auber replied, with an amused smile, "slow and sure as any Scotchman. Oh, Thorold!" he continued, as a pompous-looking English valet slowly and widely opened the door, "I fancy a sandwich of that spiced beef to-day for lunch. Pray have it put up; and tell Ralph, the red-headed gillie (I always forget their infernal names) ——"

“Oon Maikeen-zee, my lord—sir—I beg your pardon,” stuttered the valet.

“Ewen Mackenzie,” said Marchmoram, angrily. “Auber, no message can be given distinctly where, as you have seen before, affected blunders are permitted.”

The valet gave a huffed bow.

“Ewen Mackenzie, Thorold,” Auber repeated, blandly. “Pray tell Ralph to desire Mr. Ewen Mackenzie to meet me at the Bogle Spring, with a hill pony for returning.”

“Yes, sir—my lord.” And with a stately bow Thorold disappeared.

“I hate that fellow; he is as unsuited to this place as Jacques, the French cook,” Marchmoram exclaimed.

Auber laughed. “Unsuited to the place constitutionally; not individually: to myself they make part of its perfections; but Thorold, certainly, is only pleasant in his thorough English comfort: he suits London admirably. Were I to go abroad to-morrow, I would not take him: it would require all the strength of my conscience

to prevent my bribing Harold's Gupini away from him."

"Yes; he would be worth his weight in gold," replied Marchmoram. "That fellow would go neck and neck with his master through any country. Seldom in his life before (or I am much mistaken) has Gupini lived in the ease of his present servitude; and there is too much quicksilver in the rascal to make him long content with it. He is a clever fellow; but give me my own honest bull dog, Greaves—faithful in quietness, and tenacious in obedience: I require nothing else in a servant."

"No; those are your standing qualities," Auber replied, and humming an opera air, he proceeded to join the gamekeeper, who waited impatiently outside:—the passes on Stronichie had been on guard from early that morning.

It was fully half an hour afterwards that Marchmoram rose from his chair. "Pshaw!" he muttered. "No more dreams!" and glancing at a leathern bag hanging on a nail above one of the bedroom doors, he took it down, slung

it over his shoulder, put a quaigh a and small opera glass into his pocket, and sauntered out. When he felt the keen air strike his face, he turned and took a large plaid of Mackenzie clan tartan from a table where heaps of such like warm wraps lay, wound it scientifically around him, and started at a brisk pace across the heather behind the lodge; gradually descending until he reached at last one of those capital parliamentary roads which now intersect the wildest, highest grounds of the Highlands.

As he proceeded, the grey mists, which had lain cowering along the mountains all morning, gradually rose, and the sun as gradually retired behind one huge white cloud, which was the only variance to the coldly bright azure sky. The scenery now took a strange unearthly light, such as is sometimes seen in a Highland autumn day; every rock, every tree, even the very water of the river, looked mirrored, and reflected as it were in itself. There were no shadows and there was no brightness: a clear distinctness pencilled every object, doing away with all conceptions of distance.

The shooting box of Dreumah lay about eight miles from the place to which Marchmoram was bound, but in less than two hours he entered the wild strath of Erickava, where the “Post-office” stood superior midst a “toun” of peat-built hovels, the abodes of the thinned population of all the neighbouring glens. It was a low thatched cottage of two rooms, and occupied by Mrs. Jean Fraser, a Lowland woman, the widow of a Highland drover; and as she only received three pounds a year for her official duties, she eked out her means by selling small groceries and delf ware. This combination is almost invariable in the Highland districts: the shop and the post always dwell together.

Mrs. Jean Fraser, the post-mistress, started back from her spinning-wheel, as Marchmoram pushed open the door and asked for the Dreumah letters —hitherto one of the gillies had daily appeared for them: she courtesied deeply, and proceeded to separate them from a very small heap of others, addressed to the minister and one or two neighbouring lairds’ families. Meanwhile the English-

man sat down on a turf seat at the door ; and soon a small group of wild-eyed, bare-legged children gathered round, gazing on him with looks of strong curiosity and admiration. They were suddenly dispersed by a stout merry-faced girl in a blue linsey-wolsey petticoat and cotton jacket, who approached with a white bowl of rich milk and an oat cake on a platter : nodding and smiling she offered them to Marchmoram ; but as he placed a silver token of thanks on the untasted bannock, she blushed scarlet, exclaiming, “ Och, aneil ! aneil ! ”* He then, throwing the silver to a kilted laddie, took the bag from the post mistress and arose to return.

Instead of retracing his steps, he proceeded by a precipitous path along a barrier of high grey rocks, which bounded the huts and seemed to extend for miles beyond ; but a sudden turn brought him to a wide and rugged rent, through which he scrambled. He started back at the glorious grandeur of the scene beneath the height

* “ Oh, no ! no ! ”

on which he stood. Wherever the eye wandered it met the wildest, the most romantic beauties of Highland scenery. Around on every side rose the empurpled hills, towering sublime in their ancient pride of isolation. A sombre forest swept its massy length to the base of the nearest mountain ; and the light now brightening, a golden glow lit up the varied green foliage of weeping birch, lordly pines, and graceful larch. The sunbeams fell on the still waters of a small loch, which lay sparkling at the foot of a rugged black rock, like “beauty in the lap of terror.”

Marchmoram’s eyes seemed to take a brighter colour when first they gazed over the splendid landscape ; a flush passed over his brow, and he half whispered—“On my soul, how beautiful !” The next moment, in a clear excited tone, he exclaimed, “By Jove, that must be the Pike Loch !” and bounded downwards over rock, heather holes, and huge trunks of decayed trees, until he stood breathless by its margin.

While gazing on the solitude, he started, with another exclamation of surprise, as a young girl

slowly rose from behind a mossy stone, and stood within three feet of him. She was quaintly dressed in a short grey petticoat, with a white muslin jacket edged with blue braiding, the sleeves tucked up to the elbow. She had a long forked stick in her hand ; a dark coloured plaid, strong brogues and coarse stockings, lay at her naked feet, with an osier basket full of exquisite water lilies. A round straw hat hung on one arm, and she slanted it across her eyes to obtain a better view of the stranger ; then, with a deep blush, she slid down again, drawing her plaid over her feet, and tossing back her long silken hair from off her face.

Marchmoram looked at the maiden for a moment. Her hair seemed transmuted by the sunbeams to molten gold. Her eyes were blue—“darkly, brightly, beautifully blue ;” the blush had faded, and her colour was fair and pale : he did not then take time to analyse the expression in her face, but with a cold English bow he spoke—“ May I ask you the name of this lake ? ”

She smiled, and replied slowly and sweetly,

with a slight Scotch accent ; which in the Highlands of Scotland differs totally from that of the Lowlands : in the former, it is merely accent, and of a low tone, sometimes slightly faltering ; in the latter, the phraseology is different, and the accent is shrill and high-pitched.

“ I call it Loch Florachin ;—I forget the local name, but I call it Loch Florachin Bahn,* because these passion flowers grow on it : I come for them here almost daily, and wade in the water and pull them in with a stick.”

“ You mistake,” said Marchmoram, smiling, “ these are water lilies—not passion flowers, which grow very differently. Is not this a good pike lake ? ”

“ I know there is a different passion flower, but I have never seen it : these are *my* passion flowers ; I am so fond of them. This is a famous pike loch, but there is one not far off which is full of ruby red trout and char ; only it is difficult to haul.”

“ Ah ! why ? ”

* Loch of the white flowers.

“ Because there are ancient Pictish trees lying beneath, and they tear the nets.”

“ That’s the deuce of all the Highland lochs,” muttered Marchmoram.

The girl smiled.

“ Why do you smile ? ”

“ At a thought of my own, and because you pronounced *loch* very well just now : it is affectation to speak of *lakes*.”

“ I never thought *loch* a prettily pronounceable word until a moment ago,” said Marchmoram. “ Any man of University education can, or ought to, pronounce the word ; for Hebrew and Gaelic often assimilate. Do you speak Gaelic ? You look as if these hills had been your teachers ! ”

“ Yes ; I am a Highlander : my foster mother lives in that shealing. I have left my pony there while I came to gather these flowers ; and now I must go for it and ride home ere the gloamin’ approaches. There are two rivers to ford ere I get home—there,” she added, pointing to a mountain range about five miles off.

“ Allow me to fetch your pony.”

“ Thank you. It may be in the sheep fank behind that peat stack ; if you follow that track you will soon reach it.”

Scarcely had Marchmoram turned, when she slipped on her shoes and stockings, wrapped her plaid round her waist and shoulders, pulled down her sleeves, pushed on her hat, and swinging her basket to her side, pursued and overtook him with the step of a Dian.

“ Do not go for my pony ;—I shall get it for myself. I thank you very much.”

And with an abrupt courtesy she passed him.

CHAPTER II.

THE HIGHLAND FOSTER-MOTHER.

“I dreamed I lay where flowers were springing
Gaily in the sunny beam.”

“ — bring a Scotsman frae his hill,
Clap in his cheek a Highland gill,
An’ there’s the foe ;
He has na thought but how to kill
Twa at a blow.”

“But tell me whisky’s name in Greek,
I’ll tell the reason.”

BURNS.

THE young Highland girl stepped quickly up a heather track, until she stopped before a low black cottage, thatched with brown sods. A bleak stone dyke surrounded it, and in some hurdle enclosures a few piteous-looking black-faced sheep

were cropping the dry herbage. These enclosures comprised the fank ; where, in summer, the wool-clipping was done, and where the cattle sought huddled warmth during the night storms of winter. A few dark pines crowned the huge grey rocks that rose behind the cottage. It was a desolate and eerie-looking spot. A little scrubby-brushed fox ran out, as the young girl stopped at the door, and, jumping at her plaid, clung playfully to the fringe with his teeth ; but she shook it off and entered.

The earthen floor of the low-built room was strewn with withered brackens and heather ; a small black cow and a handsome little thoroughbred pony stood together tethered to a fir post, eating from one coggan full of potatoes ; a flock of cocks and hens were roosted on the rafters, and many rude implements of farming, several corn flails amongst them, lay scattered about. The atmosphere was dense with peat smoke. Having tightened the saddle girths and loosened the bridle of her pony, the maiden passed into an inner room.

This was the family room. The flooring here also was earthen; there were two small windows, the broken panes of one being replaced by sheets of mica from the neighbouring rocky hills. The hearth was built in the centre of the room, and one-half of the smoke escaped by a rent in the roof, the other half swept out into the entrance room. A table stood opposite the window, and the bed was built into the wall next it, and hung with woollen-spun curtains. Two wooden shelves, above the patchwork counterpane, contained some strangely brown books, tea and snuff canisters, and an oaken box curiously carved and clasped. A quaint-looking clock hung in one corner, and a low rocking-chair, simply constructed with twined birch twigs, stood by a spinning-wheel opposite the fire. A small dresser, on which some pots and pans and crockery-ware were arranged, had a clothes screen drawn before it. Green branches of birch were loosely laid between the black rafters and ceiling, and a huge pile of fresh fire-wood filled the space from the bed to the opposite wall.

A tall handsome woman of middle age advanced to meet the visitor. She wore a matron mutch, high and white ; a tartan scarf, bound across her full wide chest, was fastened with an antique silver brooch thin with age, and scored with many initial traditions of the past. Her petticoat was of dark blue wool, and her stockings of brown moss dye. In appearance she was the very *beau ideal* of a Highland wife. Her face was rather dark-complexioned, and the narrow band of hair visible was a deep-coloured red ; her eyes were a clear, cool, hazel ; her nose and mouth were finely formed ; but the lips were almost too red, they made one think of blood. Her hands were small and white, and she had a peculiar way of wringing them as she spoke, drawling her words in that singing tone the Highlanders use in speaking the English tongue.

“ Esmé, ma guil,* you’ll take a drink ; ” and she poured milk from a tin flagon into a glass ; then, taking down a canister, she poured some

* My love.

whisky from a flask, and added a spoonful of crushed sugar: “Drink to Normal and me.”

“To you, darling Florh.”

“Weel ah weel! let that be; it’ll na hinder fate.”

“You are not to be always making mine, Florh; I won’t have it,” cried Esmé, throwing back her head with quick scorn, and her eyes darkening dangerously. “I love eagles better than hawks;” and then, she asked quietly, “Will you read me a dream?”

“Aye, tell it. Was it dreamed last night?—Last night has a date to it.”

“Yes, my dearest mother,” Esmé replied with a sigh. “Florh, listen:—I was awakened from a deep sleep by the wildest hooting of the owls; they seemed all in flight towards the Roua Pass. I sat up in my bed; the blessed moon was resting in splendour on a dark cloud high above the hill, and shedding quivering silver on my pillow. As I gazed on her, I spoke your word, dear Florh—Roi-Orduchadh,*—and, ere I list, the cloud burst

* Destiny and fate.

into fragments, and I counted seven fantastic shadows as they floated across the 'Mother of Visions.'

I lay down again, and the rushing of the river soon soothed me to sleep. Florh, I dreamt that my sister Norah and I were lying in our own little boat, which was moored to the trunk of the old cherry-tree at the garden bank. She was sleeping. A dreamy feeling pervaded the very air ; the sun was scarcely shining, but it cast a tremulous light on the silver river, lightening and deepening the shades of the melancholy birches. There was a hush like sleep ; —a strange mysterious feeling stole over me :— not peace, but excitable unrest ; not indolence, but abandonment. The silence gradually broke : faint, faint sounds of melody arose ; the waters trembled as if the harmony breathed on them. I rose up. Then suddenly I saw shadows—those visionary moon shadows—come hurrying past ! The soft light vanished, and the old mountains looked resplendent in gold and purple glory.

Oh, Florh ! darkness came on, as the hand of

an invisible arm darted through the air and struck the cherry-tree to the earth. The river waves rose in fury ; the boat rocked and sunk. My sister and I struggled desperately in the cold and stormy water. She grasped a long honeysuckle tendril that was drooping above us ; I saw she was saved, and shrieked 'farewell' to her, as the current swept me on past her—past home—past life and hope—into the gloomy waters of a mist-covered ocean. Then Florh, I awoke !”

When Esmé ceased, her foster-mother stooped, and, raking the hearth-ashes with her finger, picked out a charred bit of pine wood. She crossed her bosom thrice with it, and put it into Esmé’s left hand.

“ Mathal voch !* picture the shapes of the seven clouds to me.”

“ I cannot do that ; but I remember the fourth was a long twisted flake, like that—”

And Esmé drew a mark on the hearth-stone with the charcoal.

* My poor darling.

“ Yes, bairn, it was this ;” and, with an exultant laugh, her foster-mother turned the hieroglyphic into the Saxon letter *f*. “ Now tell me more shapes.”

“ Well, the first clouds went whirling past in round shapes—so ; and I remember the cloud that followed that *f* was serpentine—like this ; and the last shadow of all was tailed, like a comet.”

“ Aye, aye : so and so ;” and the letters *g* and *r* and *y* were scrawled. “ Was the cloud between the two last like this ?” and she added an *e* ;—Esmé nodded. “ Then”—striking the stick against the crook over the fire, it broke in two ; Florh snatched at the pieces, and, muttering, “ Two syllables, and the first of Heaven,” drew in legible Saxon characters the name “ GODFREY.”

When Esmé had entered the cottage, Marchmoram seated himself on a heather clump within sight, and gave himself up to the luxury of day-dreams, carelessly pulling up the heather, and nipping off its deep purple bells with his teeth.

He was roused by the neigh of a pony, and,

looking up, saw his Highland naiad mounted, at the cottage door. The basket of water lilies was poised on her head (as the steadiest way of carrying them), and secured by a strap beneath the chin. This coronal gave a wild grace to her slight figure ; the pale flowers, with their cool green and transparent tendrils, softly shadowing her long golden tresses. Her hat was slung to the crupper, and her foster-mother was wrapping the plaid from her shoulder to her knee.

Esmé threw her arms around Florh's neck, and, stooping, kissed both her sun-burnt cheeks ; then, touching the bridle, she cantered rapidly down the track, past Marchmoram. She saw him not ; her eyes were fixed on the glare of the setting sun, above the hill of her dream—the famed Roua Pass.

It was about nine o'clock, and the three English sportsmen were seated round the mahogany table in the lodge of Dreumah, with a luxurious dessert spread before them—green and purple grapes from English hothouses, golden yellow pine apples, Chantilly biscuits and spiced compôtes.

The dessert service was of rich red Bohemian glass, varied by bottles and glasses of divers shapes and colours,—bright champagne frothing through crystal amber; cool claret in glass of emerald green—an inviting display.

The room was lit by a German chandelier of white and brown hart's-horns, pendant from the low ceiling; candlesticks of similar material were ranged on the shelf for bedroom use. A curtain of thick red frieze, drawn along the end of the room at this hour, concealed the windows and excluded the keen air of a Highland autumnal night.

“Well, Auber, tell us of your stalk !”

“Marchmoram, do not speak to me! The equanimity of a life-time lost its balance to-day,” and Auber laughed. “That confounded gillie, Sandy Mac Tavish! he sacrificed a royal head! I cannot go over my stalk to you: I could not bear the reminiscence. You thought I started sluggishly, but my blood warmed, man; and such a stalk! There is a gash on my knee which must cripple me for a week—it is well, with the

sequel I have to tell, that with me—*ce n'est pas la victoire mais le combat qui fait mon bonheur!*

“ At four o'clock, Ian Mac Gillivray lay hanging on the jut of the shoulder of Corricandhu, Sandy Mac Tavish in the pass of Stronichie, and myself enduring cramp amongst the high ferns at the Bogle's Spring. Ralph, who was crouched by my side, suddenly made my fingers tingle by the whisper—‘ They are coming—they are coming. I saw the advancing antlers above Stronichie a minute ago ! I hope Sandy will have the sense to hide himself and your rifle ere they reach the pass ! ’ By Jove, ere the words were well out of his mouth I heard my own rifle crack, and there was Sandy tearing down towards us, brandishing the piece above his head, his kilt and hair flying back on the scent. He was shouting as he ran—‘ Och hone ! och hone ! * but I did na kill her ! ’ I really felt blind for a moment. Had I possessed your presence of mind and decision of character, Marchmoram, of course

* Alas ! alas !

I would have let fly my rifle at the rascal's head. As it was, I simply allowed Ralph to seize him, and nearly shake his ragged jacket off him, exclaiming, 'Kill what, you devil?'

"Hoch, och! the staig—the bonny staig!"

"Were you clean daft, Sandy? What tempted you to fire? You know fine you were only to hold the gun for Mr. Auber."

"I declare the idiot began to blubber, and scratching his head, whined—'Och, I was feared she wad hae stuck me when I seen her walloching down on me!' I told him to lay down my traps and return to black cattle herding, for he was no longer a Dreumah gillie; but he cried so bitterly, and called me so many soft Gaelic dears and loves, that actually I relented and forgave him. Do you know, I don't feel sure that his enthusiasm may not prove a very promising beginning."

"I have no doubt of it, Auber," said Marchmoram, laughing. "You have won a devoted slave. The fellow was no more afraid of the stag sticking him than you were. His firing

merely arose from some mistaken idea that you only wanted the venison, and that he would get it for you if he could; and, since made aware of his great crime and your magnanimous forgiveness, he will prove his zeal and gratitude by a hundred future good services."

"Here, Auber, let us know to-morrow's beats," exclaimed Harold; and he took up a shooting-cap lying on the table and waved it to them.

"Well, then, give Stronichie to me," Auber replied, as he dived his hand into the cap and pulled out a slip of paper. There were two left, and Marchmoram exclaimed as he drew his, "Oh! the Roua Pass!" he smiled with a grimace. "I like that. I have never roused its echoes yet."

"And I am monarch of Stronichie to-morrow, Auber," cried Harold. "You must kill grouse on the flat of Bohrdell, I suppose."

"No, no; I would sooner try some hauls on the loch, or walk to the post-office! I shall draw my next trigger on Stronichie. I am determined, though the lottery should deny me for a week!"

“Well done; and take Sandy Mac Tavish to ‘stick’ your stag, Auber,” laughed Marchmoram.

“Auber,” said Harold, quietly, “if you will take Mac Tavish with you to-morrow you shall have Stronichie. I would give it up for that, though I heard the low of a hundred deer from it just now!”

“Oh! Harold—hyperbolical Harold!” cried Marchmoram.

“Oh! Harold—accepted Harold!” said Auber; and, taking up a little bell, he rang it shrilly at the door.

The pompous looking Thorold emerged from a low wooden door at the end of a narrow passage, and advanced with an affected air.

“Do you wish the keepers, my lo— sir, I beg your pardon.”

“I wish you to see if Sandy Mac Tavish is in the gillies’ shed, and send Ralph here with the answer.”

“Yes, sir;” and with stately bow he turned to a shelf which ran along the passage wall, took

down a silver candlestick with a wax light, and retreated through the wooden door.

He entered a room not unlike a three-stalled stable ; there were three high partitions in it, and each partition was a miniature bedroom for Messrs. Thorold, Gupini, and Greaves, the respective valets of the gentlemen. Mr. Thorold lit his candle at a small iron lamp which hung from the ceiling, and taking an embroidered cigar case from his waistcoat pocket, he ignited an Havanna, put it between his lips, and passed into another room—the kitchen. Several smart caps and ribbons were fluttering among the group of grey clad men at the fire-side. Mr. Thorold bestowed a few killing winks as he raised the light to a becoming height from his head, puffed gracefully, and stepped forth into the frosty air.

The moon was at the full, shining solemnly on the dark scenery beneath, and casting shadows from the high-peaked hills in grim and awful shapes, that answered to the lone silence of the night ; and it was with uncomfortably quick step

that Thorold, who, a few minutes before, had been sneering supremely over the Gaelic ghosts as described by the lodge kitchen fire, now proceeded by the deep rushing river towards the tarred shedding where the dogs and gillies dwelt together, and from whence distinctly human sounds proceeded. The strains of a Gaelic song, in its shrill minor key, arose from one part of the building, while a deep baying bass accompanied it from the other.

Mr. Thorold placed his candlestick on the ground, and putting both hands to his ears, kicked at the door. The song ceased, and a fearful din of voices and noises rose within ; he kicked again, and was in the act of balancing for a third fling, when the door burst suddenly open, and a cloud of peat smoke and a troop of wild-looking men rushed forth simultaneously—two of the gillies in deadly fight, the others encouraging them with the most unearthly shrieks and yells. Blind with rage and excitement, the Highlanders struggled furiously on towards the river bank. Thorold was thrown over and

trampled on ;—he scrambled from among their bare legs and fled towards the lodge, screaming for help. Marchmoram and Harold were soon on the scene of action :—a wild scene it was.

About twenty half-clad men, in tattered kilts of grey, their arms and legs mostly bare, were fighting in the moonlight with madman-like shouts and gestures. The two principal combatants struggled unequally together ;—one was a youth of twenty, slightly made, though tall, with a thin pale face and light red hair ; his antagonist was a brawny shepherd of thirty, a short heavy beetle-browed man. He was recklessly—as if with the strength of a battering ram—beating back his younger rival nearer to the brink of the river precipice, while the young man’s expression in his desperate resistance was terrible. With teeth clenched and eyes burning black with rage, he wrestled madly ; the pale face seemed of marble in its fixed intensity : though faint in body he was indomitable in will.

“ Mac Coinich and Mac Craw for ever !

Caberfeidh ! Caberfeidh ! ”* he shouted. The next moment he rolled backwards, and over he went, headlong into the deep black pool below.

“ Good God, save him !—A guinea to the best swimmer ! ” cried Marchmoram. “ Grant, you are a murderer,” he shouted,—seizing the shepherd by his shoulder. “ Stop this fight.”

“ Ewen Mackenzie can swoom like a saulmon ; he’ll no get but a good steep,” muttered the man sulkily. As he spoke, a ghastly face appeared above the ridge, and then the whole dripping figure of the youth ; he was panting and gasping, but advanced keenly towards Grant. Marchmoram seized his arm and held him back.

“ What has made you fight, Mackenzie ? ” he said.

“ Och, I’ll tell the trouth mysel’,” called out a squat little man from the ring formed round them. “ Hamish Grant’s the fine singer, an’ he was crying out fine a song on his own Clan

* Mackenzie and Macrae for ever ! Caberfeidh ! the war cry of the Mackenzie clan.

Alpine ; och, but he offered to sing it was the oldest clan amang us.

“ ‘ Ye’re nae blate to say that,’ says Ewen, ‘ and a Mackenzie by.’

“ ‘ Say ye’r wull of the Mackenzies,’ says Hamish, ‘ they’re but a new race to the Grants. Hae I not wi’ my ain een seen in black and white in a book as old as Ben Nevis the pedigree of the Grants ? In the vary middle o’ the pedigree it says—“ Aboot this time the world was created, and Adam and Eve born,” and never a word o’ the Mackenzies. Na ! na ! not e’en at the Flood, and that no sae far back.’

“ ‘ Hout tout ! yer’e daft,’ cried Ewen ; ‘ think ye,’ says he, ‘ that when Noah had his ark, Lord Seaforth had n’ a bit sloop o’ his ain ? ’

“ ‘ I dinna ken,’ says Hamish ; ‘ but I’ll go back to the auldest records yet. I hae heard my great grandfather say, when I was a wee laddie, that a meesprint had been made ; and, in the pedigrees before Adam, where it was put “ *Giants* lived in these days,” it was *Grants* was meant.’

“ ‘ I dinna mind that,’ says Ewen ; ‘ ye may

be as auld as Ben Nevis, but Loch Mari-water is thicker than Grant bluid.' Then up wi' Ian Macrae, of Kintail, to back him: the Red Mac Coinichs and the Black Mac Crows were aye herded. They wad horn us to the death did we no combine; so we all up at once. The six Macraes and mysel', Sandy Mac Tavish, focht wi' Ewen—for he's far from his country here; an' the Frasers, Ian Mohr, Ronald Roy, an' Shawen Mac Gillivray sided up with the Grants. It was a touzeling, man! but gie you us a dram to cool our bluid, an' we'll sleep like bairns thegether again the night."

Marchmoram and Harold both laughed.

"Shake hands, Hamish Grant and Ewen Mackenzie," said Marchmoram, "and listen:—I'll stand no such barbarism as this;—you are my servants at present, and, as such, I'll have order maintained amongst you; any repetition of a scene like this, and I'll look out for other gillies, and you may go and fight out your feuds elsewhere. Ewen Mackenzie, you require discipline. Now, shake hands," turning towards the two.

Hamish put out his hand stupidly. Ewen touched it with clenched fingers, and, giving Marchmoram a look of bitter defiance, cried in a shrill voice, “Sassenach, riamh!—Erich, agus tenginu, Conas! Conas!”* A wolfish-looking colly dog sprang to his side, and they both soon disappeared on the black track by the river edge. Harold turned to Marchmoram.

“What did he say? Is that Scotch independence?”

“That’s some of the Highland pride I have told you about. He’s off to his own fireside again, probably to starve on potatoes for the rest of the season.”

“Sandy Mac Tavish, Mr. Auber wishes you to call him at four o’clock to-morrow morning:—you and he are to stalk Stroniche.”

Sandy gave a sly grin, and slunk down his head.

* Englishman, never!—Arise, and let us go, Conas.

CHAPTER III.

EWEN MACKENZIE.

Man kinder at the festive board,
Man braver with the spear and sword,
Man higher framed for truth,—more strong
In virtue, sovereign sense, or song,
In Scotland ne'er trod down the dew.
—The thistle grows aboon the rose.

ALLAN CUNNINGHAM.

• • • • • • • • • • • • • • •
Kilmeny looked up wi' a lovely grace,
But nae smile was seen on Kilmeny's face ;
Still was her look, and still was her 'ee,
As the stillness that lay on emerant lea.

HOGG.

EWEN Mackenzie stepped through the heather like a deer. The step of the Highlander is high and springing ; watch him ascend a hill—he lifts the knee with such elasticity and equality, that down comes the foot with equal decision on

the unequal and the smooth. He steps on a rock or over a hole, and on he goes without shadow of doubt or hesitation: his eye following the eagle's flight above, but his foot firm on the native heather beneath. If a hill is very steep, he generally ascends slowly, with long grasping steps; and this brings him to the top sooner than any attempted speed. The Englishman, impetuous in life and spirits, tries to take it as his hunter would: he bounds and scrambles; but the cold grey rocks won't be taken by force; his feet slip; he pants and wipes his brow, and turns at last to take an observant lesson from Sandie. Then comes the second season, to find him master of the hills: he can no longer be beaten.

Ewen stepped fast and faster. He followed the same route that Marchmoram took the day he walked to the post; but he took cuts through the heather, avoided the beaten road, and entered his mother's shealing in shorter time than the latter took. He was the second son of Esmé's foster-mother, Florh Mackenzie.

She was a woman well to do. Her eldest son, Huistan, managed part of the large sheep farm which Glenbenrough kept in his own hands; and consequently, as in the old patriarchal fashion, he possessed a goodly flock of his own. As an honest man and an excellent shepherd, he had grown high in the laird's favour; but his homely nature took its silent way in the simply pastoral path of his duties, too abstractedly to please or strike sympathy from his mother's worldly-scheming brain.

Florh appreciated not those first germs of all which made Huistan so admirable a shepherd. His sagacity, endurance, honesty, and faithfulness, went to her no further than to his sheep: they belonged but to them. Had he been a farmer, even, with labourers to discipline, he would have ranked higher in her estimation. Huistan's life and affections seemed pretty equally divided amongst his mother, the laird, and the sheep. The former held first sway, and fierce, over poor Huistan: she ruled him as he did his colly dog. And so she ought: had not she reared him, and struggled for him, when he was left fatherless;

and was it not she who, by her influence in the Glenbenrough nursery, had built his fortune?

More than Huistan might feel the sway of Florh. She was a woman of shrewd sense and masculine will; had her sphere and her powers been higher, the elements in her character would likely have formed strange despotism: lines of queen-mothers gone before would have risen again to confound the world.

She had been foster-mother in another family, ere nursing Esmé. Her husband had been what is called a crofter—that is to say, a tenant of very small degree—on the west coast property of Arduashien, and in his life-time she had nursed the only son, young Normal Mac Alistair; he was the same age as her own boy, Ewen. Three years later, her husband, the crofter, died; and a posthumous girl dying in its birth, Mrs. Mac Alistair recommended Florh to Glenbenrough; where she nursed the little Esmé, second daughter of the laird, and where she remained nurse in chief until the latter reached her fifteenth year. In that time she had also carefully reared the

little Ishbel, Esmé's younger sister, and had nursed and tended Mrs. Mac Neil of Glenbenrough in her last illness.

Huistan and Ewen, Esmé's foster-brothers, grew up as little gillies and retainers about the house. They caught and saddled the ponies for the three little ladies ; they rowed them in their boat when desired ; they were at the beck and bend of each and all—Norah, Esmé, and Ishbel, the three daughters of Glenbenrough—and would have proudly died in their service.

But Florh lost not sight of the future. Huistan grew strong and tall ; he was seven years older than Miss Norah, and was placed under the tutelage of the shepherd. Ewen reached his fifteenth year—he was a year older than Miss Norah—and Florh went in person a ride on one of the children's ponies, Ewen leading the bridle, all the way to Arduashien. There she saw Mrs. Mac Alastair, and persuaded her to take Ewen as own valet to the youthful Normal, Florh's first and dearly-beloved foster-son. Four or five years later Florh saw her present home built, and Huistan

installed as head shepherd with the laird ; then she left Glenbenrough, and took up her abode with her son. She spun the wool, and managed the farm, so that substance increased steadily with her ; and she hoped to leave such portions to her sons as the exertions of her husband never could have attained.

Normal Mac Alastair had been sent south for education, and Ewen returned to his mother ; he was her youngest son and her favourite, and, as is generally the case, far less worthy than Huistan —the good and plodding son. Ewen was of an indolent nature ; he was active and agile in bodily strength, but he despised work : he would not have taken to the drudgery of a trade, and he would not settle to the hard-working routine of the shepherd's life. He was attached to his young master, Normal Mac Alastair, and to his mother ; but, presuming on her indulgence to himself (the only weakness in Florh's character), he was guilty of ill-temper or disrespect towards her whenever it suited him. He was of a vindictive and sullen temper ; and, with the concentration of

the Scottish character, would brood over any cause of offence until revenge or time blotted it out.

Florh had obliged him to apply for occupation as a Dreumah gillie, when the 12th of August brought the party north ; but he had not been there a fortnight when he thus decamped. His sullen pride had been wounded from the first, at finding himself the cypher he was in that establishment. He—the companion of the young Laird of Arduashien, who had waited on him by day and often slept at his feet by night, the same plaid covering them both ; he—Ewen Mackenzie—made so low now ! His English masters, seeming scarce aware of his existence, deeming it an honor to give a nod, and all commands heard through a Lowland gamekeeper, who could not shoot a deer or clean a gun as he could ! The abundant food and whisky were not the bait to him that they were to others, for he had always been accustomed to that at Glenbenrough and Arduashien. He showed his dissatisfaction by bitter gibes and sullenness ; and Ralph, the head keeper, had already made Marchmoram

aware of Ewen's intractability, when the latter gave him the rebuke which roused at once the smouldering fire into rage and hatred.

It was past midnight when Ewen reached his mother's house; but he awakened her and Huisstan, and gave his version of the affair of Dreumah. She believed it, but said little: as was her wont.

“ Well, my son, get you to your bed, and take three hours sleep. There is to be valuation in the morn at Lochandhu; the laird is to meet Huistan there, and you'll get down to Glenbenrough and go up with the laird and his men in the morn.”

The grey light was scarce dawning as Ewen was again on the heather, and now following the track which Esmé and her pony had cantered over. The pale moon still feebly shone, but it was her dying hour; and as he came to the first meeting with the river Rouagh, she gently expired, and red rays from the coming sun lit up the water.

The river came rushing from Loch Nightach, close to the lodge of Dreumah, and here

crossed the beaten road ; which, as I have said before, extended to within three miles of that lodge. A one-arch stone bridge spanned the water, and the road continued with many windings until the river again intercepted ; the second time, the waters had so shallowed at that spot that a ridge of gravel plainly marked a ford. The road then branched from the river and wound through woods of silvery birch, closing in all view, until a sudden opening revealed the river again. And now there was a choice of roads, for it forked, and led you again across the river by a light wooden bridge, and up to the door of hospitable Glenbenrough ; or you kept on your way, and the road wandered on, leaving the water behind, and fifteen miles of precipitous route brought you to the market town of Braemarin.

But when Ewen reached the first bridge (one arch stone), he went a little lower and crossed the river by a ford, which brought him to the second ford more rapidly than the road ; and when he crossed the second ford he paused.

The road stretched on to Glenbenrough; but there was a shorter cut. A path led like a thread up the rugged sides of a rocky hill which based the water's edge, and Ewen followed it; up it went, higher and higher —cut narrowly out of the side of the slippery rock, or formed by an uneven natural ledge—the edge of the precipice as it ascended being half concealed by feathery fern and light-rooted birch, with glimpses between, showing the blackness of the deep river pools beneath. So narrow was the path that the eye dared not to leave watching the feet; and steeper and steeper became the climb, until by a few bounds—straining muscles and bending knees—the summit was gained.

Then comes the Roua, or “The Red Pass.” To descend on the other side, the broad jutting shoulder must be passed;—the path leads round it, being cut out of the rock which frowns toweringly above and descends sheer beneath, a hundred fathoms down to the roaring river edge—the sides shelved in rough layers of red clay and sand, washed by

the rain of centuries into blood-coloured ruts and furrows. The path is red and crumbled on the outer brink ; there is not a stone nor a stick to hold by, and the distracting screams and quick flights of the hawks around and above might well unnerve the unpractised eye or foot. A few fir posts had once been sunk along the edge, but they had mostly rotted and toppled helplessly over. The Pass takes a sharp turn, and, the broad shoulder passed, many might have thrown themselves on the rugged bosom of the hill and hugged it in their trembling thankfulness for safety ; but not Ewen, nor any of the family of Glenbenrough.

The path led down the hill, covered on this side with bright heather and birch ; fields of verdant grass shining beneath, dotted with herds of grazing cattle. An old grey stone house stood in the midst, enshrined amongst ancient trees of scyamore, fir, and lime, which stretched to the river ; further on were seen the wooden bridge spanning the gliding stream, and the wooded roads beyond which lead to it.

The house of Glenbenrough was very old. Mr. Mac Neil often said that if he had a son, he would pull it down and, by a judicious mortgage, build a modern one, in good taste, that his name, as its founder, might go down to his great grandchildren: most likely for them to criticise the architecture, exactly as he now did his great grandfather's. But there was no male heir to Mac Neil: he had never had a son, and the land was to pass to strangers;—his three daughters might in time marry the sons of other families; and he was content to do good in his own generation, and be the father of his people, spending the rental amongst them while he lived.

And a most indulgent father to his family and the people, Glenbenrough was;—he was one of the race now fast dying out, or being bought out, in the Highlands. His pedigree was dear to him, for its long list of deeds of valour and honour achieved by his ancestors: it had been handed down to him without stain, and he gloried in keeping it so. His eye kindled, and his step grew firmer, as he paced the room of an

evening, recounting old lore of genealogy to listening daughters; and he exultingly dwelt on the days of his own young prowess, when he proved himself a worthy son of his "forbears" in personal bravery and power of endurance.

He told them of himself and his cousin, Sir Alastair, leading the Glenbenrough and Strathshielie men against those of all Strathfarra, and winning games of shinty five years running; and of the weeks that he and Arduashien had slept on the heather heights to mark and kill the deer of the royal heads; of the bonfires made to roast the carcase whole, and the dancing of Hie'land lads and lasses round the blaze. In those days claret was drunk pure from Bordeaux, and smuggled whisky sixty over proof; the wine and whisky gave no headaches to them: men could drink seven bottles of claret in a night, and went out to spear the salmon by the rising sun without a tremble in the hand! John Neil Mac Neil was a fine-looking man, of, it might be, fifty years; of a tall and upright figure; his grey hair was full upon the temples, and his

bright blue eye smiled more than his thin but well-cut lips. His features were rather sharp, but the lineaments of his ancestors were there—men who had anciently commingled blood of Gael with Gael in love as well as war—sending descent of Celtic bravery at home, united with chivalrous marriage abroad. Not an eye that rested on that face amongst the people far and near, but lighted kindly, and a Gaelic benediction followed.

In the Highlands of Scotland, a proprietor stands morally on as different ground to that of one in England as he does literally; indeed it must be so, were it merely for the vast extent of ground, comparatively speaking, which forms a property in the Highlands. Sixty thousand acres is but a medium sized estate in the Highlands, whereas three thousand acres would make a goodly property in England. Aye, and the latter in its produce and its rental would swallow up the needy tracts of the former.

The sixty thousand acres being spread over wild hills and bogs, lakes and rivers, forming a whole country, and with its native inhabitants

too—the beasts and birds of the Pictish forests, and the people of one name, who love the soil and the waters as their flesh and blood—the proprietor of the Highland estate may wander at his will for days and days, his feet springing on his own heather land, and the towering hills above owning him as their lord.

The people are scattered few and far, but the extent is great; and were he to call a gathering of his clan, they would start up from the furthest corries, and come hastening in to receive the bidding of his will. The rents they pay are small, but the honour they bring is great; and who can command the oft-coveted allegiance of fellow-men on a prouder feeling of independence more readily than a legitimate Highland laird, beloved by his tenantry?

The three thousand acres in merry England support a well-built hall and numerous fields of richest grain and pasture. Comfortable tenant-farmers live on them, and pay the weighty rents. In England it is the rental which measures the extent of the man's property; and he is measured

by it. In the Highlands of Scotland the property exceeds incalculably, in extent, the rental ; and the man's value is estimated by his extent of land. The Highland laird locally exceeds his English brother in importance as greatly as he does in territory, though their relative rentals may be the same—exceeds him, even though his rental of the sixty thousand hilly acres may be much inferior to that of the three thousand English acres of plain.

It was no wonder if Glenbenrough was of a keen and impetuous temper ; a Highland laird has not so much need to govern it. In a fit of passion, when his blood was younger, he had once thrown a tenant into the river, and the man had said, as he emerged all dripping, “Laird, laird, why did you trouble yourself?” But roughness was far from being naturally the temperament of Mac Neil. His sense of honour, unflinching truth, and courage, gave him the pride of independence ; and he had that courtesy of manner which a kindly nature taught : his heart beat with cordial warmth to all his fellow-

creatures. Hospitality descended as an hereditary virtue to Glenbenrough, as it did to most of his Highland contemporaries.

It may be barbarous to force a guest to eat more venison and drink more claret than suits his constitution; but would not that guest, when travel-worn and hungry, value the open portal and the blazing hearth-fire made so welcome to him? In the olden days, the thoroughfares and the inns were few and bad, and travelling peer (scarce in those days, too) or peasant might hie to the neighbouring mansion, and there be fed and sheltered: indeed, the primitive times of hospitality only slowly vanished as the rapid increase of roads and strangers made it necessary. The spirit and early habit exists still with some of the oldest of the living generation—among those who proudly cherish it as an hereditary virtue, and who still hold fast the remote home and place of their fathers.

But the test must be exclusive indeed, were Highland hospitality of the present day to be judged by that of the past; it would be exclu-

sive, for few of the past remain. Men of modern names—sounding suitably and clannishly enough to southern ears, but grating unfamiliarly on the Highlander—are seated in the olden places; modern proprietors whose wealth is superior to that of the native predecessor, but whose hospitality is inferior, since they dispense the stalled ox only to wealthy southern equals, despising the barbarous society around. The hospitality of Glenbenrough, however, was genial and genuine as himself; it was as extensive as his father's had been, only more discriminating.

A low flight of steps led up to the house-door, which stood open until the winter snow came to block it up. The hall was decorated on one side with arms of the olden time, arranged in many fantastic devices; several Lochabar axes formed pillars on either side of a rude leatherne target studded with brass, which was surrounded by a row of naked dirks to represent a mimic sun. The ponderous battle axe of Eachin Bohroogh, first chief of the Mac Neils, lay harmless beside the huge claymore of his rival. Weapons which

had never met, save in mortal hate and strife, here crossed each other, rusted with disuse; and part of the boyish armour of a great grand uncle of Glenbenrough, who had died in the service of France, lay loyally on a *fleur-de-lis* casket which Prince Charles had sent to the family fifty years later.

The three other sides of the hall were hung with red-deer hides, above which branching antlers reared on heads of deer in every attitude of life (some of them shot nigh two hundred years ago), which frowned, with royal gaze, upon the ascending visitor. A narrow staircase led to the drawing-room, which was thickly matted with red and roe deer skins, and the walls adorned with trophies of sport. It was a large and airy apartment, carpeted with a thick drugget of plaid pattern; a blazing fire of coal and pine, which filled the room with warm spruce scent, lighted up the solid old black furniture. Quaint old pieces of tapestry, framed in oak carvings of fruit and flowers, showed faces fit for Moloch and Puck peeping out; the subjects as

antiquated as the style—scarlet ladies with azure ribands transfixed by a malicious cupid in a red jacket poised on his left leg, and gallant hunters issuing from pigmy forests with a most tender simper.

There were several old mirrors on the walls, also in carved frames, and ornamented by fresh tendrils of deers' grass hanging in profusion like a drapery; but the chief thing to strike the eye in the room was the beautiful arrangement of flowers. On each table, even on the piano, were groups of flowers—no rare or conservatory flower amongst them, but common garden flowers arranged in such taste and colouring as to delight the eye. This was the delight and the taste of Norah Mac Neil, who never neglected it. A stand between two of the three windows was filled with water lilies, their tendrils drooping to the carpet.

Esmé sat near them, leaning on the broad sill of the window looking up the river, which stretched its silver flood as far as eye could reach; the hills rising from the very water—

some of bare rock, others clothed with dark green pine and purple birch, and some wrapped in heather and grass. The other window looked only on the Roua Pass and some of the distant peaks of Dreumah beyond ; and the third window showed the garden and rocky orchard at the back of the house. It was about six o'clock in the afternoon, and Norah, Esmé, and Ishbel Mac Neil were seated in the drawing-room, waiting their father's return from his sheep valuation at Lochandhu.

Norah was a tall girl of twenty, with a slight though handsome figure. A clear and vivid complexion gave expression to very regular features, which generally were in rather grave repose ; yet when she smiled the rich brunette of eye, hair, and cheek, all lighted into brightness : indeed, the face was better worth studying in its softly coming lights and shades than many a more sunny countenance. Norah was naturally thoughtful, and the gift of self-regulation seemed to have been given to her from childhood. Naturally amiable, and with the self-taught

decision arising from intuitive common sense, her responsibilities came pleasantly to herself and all around her.

It was her duty to guide and govern her father's house and the two younger children ; to see that hospitality was practised without waste, and that charity should be given wherever needed ; to study that her father's income should meet its many local demands, and to humour and honour the warmth of heart and impetuous temper which made him beloved and feared by all his dependants. It was her thoughtful eye that strove to see Esmé and little Ishbel properly balancing each other : Esmé required to have the cord of Norah's sound sense put round her sometimes.

The three sisters were dressed alike in white muslin, with bare arms and necks : being strong and healthy, they never muffled in the evening. Norah had a bouquet of deers'-grass and heather, pinned with a shawl brooch, on her corsage ; Esmé and Ishbel had each a ribbon of the royal Stuart tartan passed, snood like, through

their hair, which hung in natural curls upon their shoulders.

Ishbel was like Norah, a bright brunette, with very dark hair; but she had a piquant little face, and her eyes were more restless than Norah's. She was but fifteen, and promised to be also very tall, being now nearly of equal stature with Esmé; who would never overtake Norah's rather unusual height. Esmé wanted but a short space to her eighteenth birthday; though, from her fairness, she looked younger. Her features were not nearly so regular as those of her sisters, but in expression they varied with every mood — storm and shade, sunshine and moonlight came there, inconstant as in a northern summer; though with her these phases were but the reflections of a somewhat dreamy inner life on a mobile speaking face, for Norah's equal temper was not more sweet and enduring than her's.

Esmé's eyes and hair were of rare beauty; the latter of the pure Scandinavian gold, without a tinge of red or brown to darken it, and it hung in wavy tresses to her waist: she knew

it was uncommon and liked to see it glitter in the sun. Her eyes were of a peculiar tint of blue: when she sat in thought the pupil darkened and dilated into a dreamy fulness, emulating the wrapt fervour of a Magdalen, or the earnest sadness of the Cenci; but when she was aroused to lively discussion, or struck by a sense of the ludicrous, the blue sparkled with vivid colour, and kindled into intensity as imagination was excited.

Esmé was far from being sentimental at this moment, for she exclaimed impatiently, “Norah, Norah! who will come back with papa from Lochandhu to-day? There will be old Borlagh, and Dr. Macconochie, and old Macpherson of Phee; and they’ll talk of ewes, and haggots, and wedders, and the dining-room will be perfumed by whisky toddy for a week. I shan’t sit near old Borlagh, he makes me ill!”

“Nor I either, Norah!” echoed little Ishbel. “Esmé, Esmé, you guessed right,—here they are all coming down the Roua Pass; but there’s another man with papa, and papa is pointing

out the bridge and house to him. He is a stranger!"

Esmé ran to the other window, and a slight blush passed over her face, as she exclaimed, "A saving clause! Norah, here is the man I told you about, whom I saw at Lochandhu yesterday. Where in the world has papa met him? I am so glad."

Glenbenrough and Marchmoram entered the room shortly after the other guests. The idea of any little toilette duties, or even slight ablution after the handling of the sheep and other occupations of the day, never entered the head of one of these worthy old men; and it was well their huge nailed brogue shoes rested on the sensible drugget of the Glenbenrough drawing-room—a Turkey carpet must have suffered.

This was the first time that the idea of dining in the company of ladies in his shooting-dress ever became familiar to Marchmoram. He knew that in these remote regions it constantly happened, and was looked upon as a matter of course (in circumstances like the present); but it re-

quired a strong inward argument as to the fact of this being a barbarous region, and the Highland lassies he was going to meet being different beings to his English friends, to reconcile him to the breach of breeding.

Glenbenrough had met Marchmoram on the summit of the Roua Pass half-an-hour before ; it was a portion of his property which the former had let to the proprietor of Dreumah for the convenience of the sporting tenants, as it made a good boundary to their huge tract of shooting ground. He had at once introduced himself to the Englishman, and taking his gun from his hand, turned him downwards to introduce him to the house of Glenbenrough, with many kind speeches as to hopes of future intimate and kindly acquaintance with him and the rest of the Dreumah party.

The three girls were standing together as their father entered and introduced Marchmoram to them ; dinner being announced at almost the same moment, the pursy Dr. Macconochie, as pastor of the parish and father of a family,

seized upon Norah and ushered her out, Esmé following with Marchmoram, and little Ishbel keeping old Borlagh at arm's length. Marchmoram had had a presentiment that his naiad of the day before might prove one of the Miss Mac Neils, and he had thought of it while shooting that day.

When the Miss Mac Neils heard his name pronounced, they knew it as the leader of the Dreumah party, and as a name familiar amongst the lower classes around them, who told stories of the wealth and luxury of the establishment, and of the sums generously distributed for two seasons back by the party when they left the country. They had heard from Ewen Mackenzie that very morning, his experience of the pride and power of Dreumah Lodge, and of the distance at which Marchmoram kept his Highland menials.

Marchmoram asked Esmé if she had had a pleasant ride home, and said he saw the lilies had been carried safely.

“Yes, that was a charming evening,” she

replied, smilingly ; “ I did not think we should have met so soon again : ” and then, turning archly, “ Can you eat barley broth and roast mutton ? ”

Marchmoram smiled. “ Your mountain air makes my appetite always sharp : I am very hungry.”

“ Oh, but I mean that Norah ordered dinner to-day for sheep farmers, not for you : you have turtle soup, and a French cook at Dreumah ! ”

“ Yes, Miss Mac Neil, and a dear bought luxury Mons. Jacques is ; he gives more trouble than even the organization of the Gillie band, and rushes on our presence wringing his hands, if the carrier’s cart is delayed an hour beyond time. You know the lodge of Dreumah ? Well, when we arrived there this season, Jacques thought we were merely stopping, *en passant*, at the dog-kennel. We all alighted and disappeared in various directions : not one of us had courage to tell him it was to be his dwelling-place and to usher him into the kitchen ! The news was soon abruptly broke by the game-

keepers, and he wept and *sacré'd* in French until he was exhausted."

Esmé laughed heartily, and Marchmoram asked if she approved of French cookery.

"I have very seldom seen it, only when visiting some of our friends: our cook has twelve pounds a-year for wages (that is the maximum sum here) which proves the moderate amount of accomplishment expected. But habit, we all know, is life; and you very likely could not undergo the fatigue of the hill unless you lived as you do. At least, you only come to the Highlands for enjoyment, and are right to use all accessories to it, instead of the reverse, which the native cooks would likely prove: indeed, they certainly would. Now I don't like haggis, but it does not disturb me to see it at table: I simply choose grouse, and drink water when my neighbour takes spruce beer; but even the sight of such things might spoil your appetite.

"In the same way,"—here she dropped her voice to a whisper,—"I know how good and kind

an old man Macpherson of Phee is, while you merely see him to be inexpressibly vulgar ; and when he speaks, as he may, by and bye, of prosy old stories of former rough lines, I shall understand him perfectly from early association, where you may be but shocked by his barbarism."

"Ah!" was the only reply of Marchmoram ; who, leaning back absently, sat in silence.

Norah was talking of the crops to Borlagh, and listening to his details of the potatoe failure ; all of which he ascribed to the "new-fangled, outlandish guano and bone-dust schemes, ruining and naturally diseasing the land" : her fine features were lighted by true politeness as she listened and tried to please her father's guest.

Esmé turned to Mr. Macpherson and asked him with smiling significance if he had had any excisemen lately visiting at Phee.

He chuckled, shrugged his shoulders, and rubbed his hands with delight.

"Hout tout, Miss Esmé ; tak' a bit o' muir-fowl and leave yon alone!"

"Oh, Phee, tell us of your last barrel ;" cried

Ishbel—"do you know, Mr. Marchmoram, that Mr. Macpherson buried a barrel of smuggled whisky in his garden ten years ago, and when he went to dig out his treasure a week ago he found it had evaporated: only the skeleton of the barrel was there; all the staves and hoops tumbled together in the earth! Did he not deserve it?"

"Weel, weel, Miss Ishbel, there's one in my cellar at any rate will keep for ye're marriage day! It'll no do to keep the r'ael stuff anywhere else in these guager days. Glenbenrough could tell you of other times though: do you mind, sir, of yon bit lassie, that Miss Ishbel, I'll warrant wad ha'e imitated."

"Yes, that was a good story," said Glenbenrough; and he told an anecdote of his boyish days, when he knew of every still on the hill side. An alarm was given one day that the excise were coming down the Roua Pass, and he, the young laird, dashed up the face of the opposite hill, and into the cottage of Hamish Stuart. "Hide, Hide!—they come," was all he had

time to say. The words were scarcely out of his mouth when he saw how hopeless was the case. There were only the three children in the house, the eldest a girl of fourteen ; but she had heard, and, with a quickness of hand and intelligence beyond belief, sprang to the bed, and pulled out from underneath it a large tub of clear distilled whisky ; then, flying to a chest, she threw a quantity of linens into it and on the floor by it, with some pieces of soap, and stood with sleeves tucked-up and an empty pitcher in her hand, as the excise officers stopped at the threshold.

“Aye, aye, my lass !” they said, “here we are, and you may call your father and mother as soon as you like, to help us in finding your smuggled store.”

“Father’s on the hill with the sheep, and mother is before me at the burn for water: we are busy with the washing the day ; but ye may look and search but and ben, and out and in. Ye hae come a long travel to find nothing,” she replied boldly.

She then gave her pitcher to a younger sister (not deficient in intelligence either), and desired her go to the burn and help her mother up with more water, while she coolly proceeded to sort the clothes on the floor. The whisky, not being disturbed, gave forth no evidence. The excise men searched as she had advised them, but and ben, out and in ; and, after an hour's fruitless hunt, marched up the hill to further suspected places, swearing at the wrong information given them of Hamish Stuart.

Marchmoram again turned to Esmé.

“ Does much smuggling still go on in this district ? ”

“ Yes, more or less each season ; though of course to no extent in comparison with what it did ten or twelve years ago. You know you can't argue the people into it's being wrong ; they think the Queen is rich, and that she cannot possibly require the small amount of duty they keep from her.”

Shortly after the dessert had been placed on the table, a silver kettle full of boiling water

was brought in, and tumblers with toddy ladles—spoons of a round shape, with long handles of ebony and silver. Glenbenrough called for claret, which was placed opposite Marchmoram, while the host and other guests began to mix their toddy. The young ladies rose and proceeded to the drawing-room. Not long after Marchmoram followed. Norah and Ishbel were not in the room, and Esmé was seated on the window sill, watching the setting sun. Marchmoram stood beside her.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” she exclaimed, raising her head, her blue eyes beaming brightly upon his face.

“Beautiful!” he replied, with his own fixed upon her.

“When I was a little girl there was a poor crazy woman lived here; we called her ‘Foolish Jeanie’: she was quite harmless, and she used to follow us everywhere and join in our play. What a lover of the sky she was! She used to paint such imagery for us out of the clouds: she improvised courts of royal state and glorious

purple robes, and bloody battle fields with wreathing smoke. I learned to study the scenery of heaven from her thus; so far as it was visible to us."

"I am very sure you know more of heaven than of earth," Marchmoram said in a low voice.

"I love the world so far as I know it," said Esmé brightly; "I love my own beautiful, beautiful Highlands, where I have never seen any misery; for even the poorest people here are contented. It seems as if the mountain air braced their minds as well as their bodies. They are all happy on the hills. None of our old people would exchange their peat smoke for coal fire in a town."

"Have you never been out of the Highlands?"

"Never;" and she laughed. "Only fancy, I have never seen a railway, or been in a steam-boat, even! If I could not read and also listen to people who had travelled, what a little savage I should be!"

Marchmoram did not answer: he seemed absent; yet his eyes were fixed on her neck.

She blushed ; “ Do you think it wrong my wearing this ? ” she asked, putting up her hand quickly to a little necklace of scarlet beads round her throat ; “ it is part of a French rosary my foster-mother gave to me : it belonged to her mother, who was a Roman Catholic ; but I only wear it for ornament, and did not think any one would know what it was.”

Marchmoram now blushed slightly as he replied, “ Oh, no, not at all wrong.” He had been gazing at the pure whiteness of her neck, not at the necklace ; but Esmé was innocent. Poor child !

“ Norah and Ishbel are in the garden ; let us go too.” They went down stairs and met the sisters in the hall ; but Norah threw her plaid on again, and they all sallied out together. The garden was a large rambling one ; the upper part at the back of the house was laid out in grass and plats of flowers, with pretty baskets of fir cones and birch, and was nicely kept. It spread on into clumps of trees, flowers, and vegetables, until it joined an old orchard, quite a wilderness of

knotted old apple and cherry trees ; this swept down to the river banks in front of the house, but lower down, and the fruit trees became lost midst birch and chestnut and lime. A boat was moored by a chain to the trunk of an old cherry tree on the river bank, and in an open summer house by it were stored trout fishing rods, baskets, and other apparatus.

“ Do you like fishing, Mr. Marchmoram ? ” Norah asked. “ We often amuse ourselves with it : at least Ishbel and I ; but Esmé is lazy.”

“ You mean too active, Norah ! I don’t like it because it requires such patience.”

“ Well, our reasons assimilate, Miss Esmé : I don’t like it, because it is not exciting enough,” he said with a smile.

“ I wish Normal would come,” cried Ishbel, that we might make some of our excursions. Have you ever seen our cousin Normal, Mr. Marchmoram ? ”

“ No ; is he one of the clan ? ”

“ Oh no ! He is our nineteenth or twentieth cousin. He is young Arduashien, Mac Alastair

of Arduashien's only son: he is instead of a brother to us; but I don't think he will be your's, Esmé!"

"Ishbel! hush. Let us row a little down the river, Norah," said Esmé, unwinding the chain as she spoke. They stepped into the boat, and Norah took one oar while Marchmoram took the other; but he bit his lip, for he was awkward in pulling, and he was afraid the little Celts would laugh; however, the boat glided with the current, and they merely used their oars when Ishbel gave warning of a sunken rock.

"Sing Normal's song, dear Norah," she said, and without further pressing, Esmé and Norah sang sweetly a little Gaelic song, the refrain of which haunted Marchmoram's ears all the evening,

"Foam, Foam, Foam, Essain."

The river banks on both sides were thick with underwood, tall natural hollies, and a species of small wild black cherry-tree peculiar to Scotland; while tall ferns and ivy and honeysuckle grew down to the water's edge. Beyond

the green foliage rose the blue and grey ridges of hills, marking the course of the road on the opposite side of the river. The girls pointed out, at one place, the black game sitting heavily on the leafy branches above them. “I think they must know us,” cried Ishbel, laughing, “for they are never disturbed when we come floating past them.”

The perfume of the honeysuckle was sweet on the river breeze, and the exquisite note of the thrush and blackbird (they are called the mavis and the merle in Scotland), came with it. The colouring of earth, sky, and water, and the white dresses of the girls, seemed all to blend into beauty together. Marchmoram felt his senses soothed and satisfied. How pleasant it was: enjoyment without distraction.

When they returned to the house, the tea table was spread in the drawing-room; a hissing urn rose amid plates piled with oat cakes, toast, and honey; but there was no appearance of Glenbenrough or his guests.

“ You must not think papa remiss, or forgetful

of you," Norah said; "but he is talking of his sheep. The old gentlemen of the last generation, like those in the other room, would scarcely think of coming to the drawing-room at all: when they sit long and order fresh relays of toddy, they get quite absorbed in each other's society, and would sit almost all night talking of their past and present. I will go to the piano and play a reel; perhaps that may bring papa."

And shortly after they all appeared; Borlagh, his complexion suffused to purple and his breathing painfully apoplectic, sat down with a grunt upon the sofa; and Dr. Macconochie, having asked Esmé for a "dish of tea," descended stiffly and slowly beside him. Macpherson, of Phee, stood on the rug cracking his fingers and shuffling his feet to the reel tune. Glenbenrough drew Marchmoram to the window, and a discussion on sport and the various beats of Dreumah began.

Soon after, Marchmoram said he saw that the gillie whom he had despatched back to Dreumah before dinner was now in waiting with his hill pony, and he thought it as well to get round the

Roua Pass in daylight, or rather, ere darkness increased. There were delays, though, ere he had said good night; and as he mounted at the door, the moon rose pale and silvery behind the hill. "She will lighten the Pass—and don't hold the pony's head," cried Glenbenrough as Marchmoram rode off.

Marchmoram looked back as he ascended the path, and saw three white dresses floating on the threshold of the old grey house; he thought he could distinguish the fair hair of Esmé in the moonlight. As he reached the summit of the Pass the moon was in full splendour, and cast the shadow of himself and pony back toward the house.

As the pony turned the abrupt corner, and placed hoof before hoof with faltering step in rounding the Pass, Marchmoram felt a fascination in the danger which made his eyeball dilate, and he gazed beneath with unwinking eyelids and breath suspended. The red precipice ran headlong down—he felt as if leaning over it—and the river beneath was so dark in the distance

that the moon only glimmered here and there where the water fretted on a rock. Dark and fantastic shadows lay before him and crossed his path.

Just as the pony, with a sort of bound of relief, sprang snorting up on the other side, it reared up in affright so as nearly to strike the outer edge again. A grey clad figure was sitting on the downward path, and Marchmoram, as he spurred the pony past, recognized Ewen MacKenzie, resting on his way back to his mother's cottage at Lochandhu.

“ I 'll displace ye on the path to Glenbenrough yet,” muttered Ewen in Gaelic, as his late master rode on.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FISHING OF LOCH NIGHTACH.

They passed the muir o' berries blae,
The stone dyke on the lea,
They reached the lodge o' the bonny rae
Beneath the birchen tree.

· · · · ·
And they rade on—and they rade on,
And a' by the light of the moon,
Until they cam to yon wan water,
And there they lighted doun.

MINSTRELSIE.

IT was on the 20th of August that Marchmoram dined at Glenbenrough, and on the 22nd he retraced his steps there and called. The family was from home; the laird and the Miss Mac Neils had gone to Strathshielie for a couple

of days. He wrote this note and left it at the house:—

Dreumah Lodge, August 22.

DEAR SIR,

I regret being obliged to write a request which I had hoped to have made verbally. Should the 25th be auspicious in weather, might I ask you to give me the pleasure of your company here that day; and, if your daughters do not dread a moonlight ride home, they would perhaps accompany you.

We would draw Loch Nightach for trout: they do not object to fishing, I believe.

Our lunch now is two o'clock.

With regards,

Believe me,

Your's, very truly.

G. MARCHMORAM.

“ Oh, dear papa, let us go ! ” cried Ishbel and Esmé together, when this note was found on their return home on the 23rd. “ We have not been at Dreumah for several years. What do you say, Norah ? ”

“I don’t know,” replied Norah, slightly hesitating. “Papa, do you think it would be perfectly correct?”

“Correct?” Glenbenrough drew himself to his full height. “What do you mean, child? When with your father all places are correct. The question simply is, do you care to go or not?”

“Norah,” rejoined Esmé with quick pride; “we do anything incorrect?—The Mac Neils of Glenbenrough! Who would ever dare to say or think it? I am afraid Marion and Julia have been infecting you at Strathshielie. Since their return from that London school they have quite altered, and have become quite like English girls in hours and habits.”

Esmé had never known an English girl in her life.

“Well, well,” Norah replied. “Certainly we may do much as we like here, and I have no wish to see things altered in that respect. Very well, papa, we will go on the 25th, if the day is fine.”

On the morning of the 25th the sun shone bright as could be wished, while a slight breeze came rippling from the west—the very day to choose for loch fishing. Glenbenrough at dawn had despatched a cart laden with his quota of nets and men: he was determined that the united appliances of himself and the Dreumah party should that day force Loch Nightach to disgorge trout and char in quantities sufficient to justify its reputation.

At breakfast the girls told their father they would prefer riding to driving, as going by the Roua Pass, instead of by the bridge and road, saved fully half an hour in distance; so at twelve o'clock they mounted. Glenbenrough rode a rough-shod Galloway, and the three girls their respective Shetland ponies,—lovely little creatures, parallel amongst horses to the roe amongst deer; and, like them, peculiar to Scotland.

These ponies were almost like dogs in sagacity and attachment to their mistresses; having been in the possession of the girls, and in almost daily use, for some years: not merely for an

easy canter on a road, and then to be handed over, on dismounting, to a groom, but as the companions of long summer days,—the pony scrambling with its rider over rocky precipices where the rider might scarcely have gone on foot, and leaping instinctively over bog-pits which would otherwise have proved fatal to the rider. They generally fed on the hill pastures near the house ; and when the girls wished to ride, the ponies, if within hail, would come galloping to their voice. Sometimes, if in their rambles the girls met their quadruped pets when not wanted, they ran, or skirted them till out of sight ; for so sure as the view became mutual, the ponies came galloping and frisking after them like dogs, and followed them as pertinaciously, poking their heads into the pockets of their mistresses' dresses in search of oat-cake or fruit.

The girls could all saddle their own ponies when necessary ; and generally, on returning from their rides, they had a primitive and not very tidy fashion of ungirthing saddle and bridle and throwing them on the hall-door steps. The

pony, thus quickly relieved, would pace away to the hill, while the first servant who might see the harness lying there would bear it off to the stable.

Norah, Esmé, and Ishbel were dressed alike in skirts and jackets of small-check shepherd-tartan, spun and dyed by their quondam nurse, Florh. It was what is called hard tartan, and of much cooler texture than the soft wool tartan. As they wore skirts of ordinary length in riding their little ponies, you often caught sight of well-shaped feet and ankles, stockings of similar pattern to their dress, and high shoes called brogues, strapped with a buckle and thongs of leather across the instep, and having devices of thistles and caherfeidhs* cut in leather and sown on the upper part of the shoe. Esmé, however, wore a round straw hat trimmed with broad blue ribbons, as she objected to sun-burning; but Norah and Ishbel wore Glengarry bonnets of dark blue cloth, with a little scarlet top-knot,—a very slight pro-

* Deer heads.

tection from the searching August sun: but his beams only enriched their brunette complexions.

The old man-servant, Cameron, and Ewen Mackenzie, who was in attendance, pulled three twigs from a birch tree, which were to serve as whips; and then, with smiles as bright as the sunshine, the girls gave loose the reins and followed their father up the Roua Pass. Florh Mackenzie was at the door of her cottage as they passed Loch-andhu, and she waved her hand to them.

It was nearly two o'clock by the sun as they turned off the road where it drew towards its close, and struck into the heather tract which brought them down upon Dreumah. The baying of the kennelled dogs would have been a guide to its exact locality; but Marchmoram was himself standing on a hillock above the lodge, and he sprang forward to meet them the moment Glenbenrough came in sight. His face was beaming with health and pleasure, and the thorough ease and *empressement* of his manner made the girls feel as if he were an old acquaintance whom they had come upon by surprise.

Two gentlemen in grey shooting dresses were standing at the door as they all arrived. Marchmoram introduced them as his friends, Mr. Harold and Mr. Auber. They also had the same bland manner of pleasant welcome, cordial yet quiet. Glenbenrough shook their hands with both his, his kindly nature expressive in the grasp. He spoke to Marchmoram as he might have done to a nephew,—“ We shall have capital sport ; the day could not be better. My dear fellow, I have taken the liberty of sending on my man Sandie and my large trout net ; which, in conjunction with yours, will do the work well, I think. The girls tired !—not they, indeed. They have enjoyed the ride as much as I have.”

Harold and Auber were admiring the ponies as they assisted in the dismounting.

“ Yes, they are as good as brothers to us,” Esmé said ; they take us wherever we wish.”

“ We thank them for bringing you here to-day,” Auber replied, stroking her pony’s head. “ What pretty names have you invented for them ?”

“ Mine is Suil-a—pronounced Zala: it means ‘beautiful eyes,’ in Gaelic. See how it turns them now when I speak: aren’t they beautiful brown animal eyes? My sister Norah’s pony is called Kelpie, and Ishbel’s, Methal.”

“ And what is the translation of these two latter?”

“ Oh! don’t you know the Kelpie? It is a wicked little water spirit, very common in the Highlands: it lives in brown burns and tarns.* I think I have often seen it,” and she laughed merrily; “ and Methal is Gaelic for ‘darling.’ ”

There was a move into the lodge. Lunch was spread in the sitting-room, and the door of Marchmoram’s room, marked B. No. 2, stood open. The girls entered and dropped their hats and gloves, and smoothed their hair with Marchmoram’s ivory-handled brushes, laid out for their use. They would have needed no cosmetic to efface the marks of weather, for their complexions flushed clear with health. Exercise

* Very small deep lochs.

had darkened Esmé's eyes into violet blue ; the pupil dilated soft and black, and one cheek burned a deeper pink than the other. She was in merry spirits, and lived in the present, just now : no waking dream or reverie was on her face, or in her thoughts, as oft at other times. They were to come by and bye.

Greaves, Harold, and Gupini, the respective valets, now appeared *en train*, bearing amber-coloured soups, and lunch was announced. Marchmoram and Auber took their seats at head and foot of the table. Norah sat next the former, and Esmé by the latter, while Harold sat betwixt the sisters, and Ishbel and Glenbenrough opposite. It was a *recherché* lunch in its display of delicacies, and Mons. Jacques had exerted himself in French cookery ; for the *entremets* were puzzling in name and number.

Iced champagne flowed freely, and conversation with it, sparkling and exhilarating. Sport in the Highlands was fully discussed, and illustrated with anecdotes of famous "stalks" and wild adventures, the girls joining in the talk with the

ease of an habitual topic. The habits of the deer and the grouse seemed familiar to them, as those of domestic poultry might have been to English girls. Natural history, native character and scenery, the Highlanders and their superstitions, succeeded each other in general conversation.

Esmé's lively sallies took Marchmoram's attention most frequently. Every thing she said had more or less point, and there was such perfect artlessness and simplicity in her youthful manner that not the faintest shadow of presumption could be traced in it. It was bracing, healthy talk, and renovating to the spirits.

A hum of voices outside, and the grey tops of congregated bonnets seen above the window-sill, showed that the gillies were in waiting; and at half-past three the party adjourned again to the open air. There were about thirty men standing or sitting on the grass, who rose and gave a shout of readiness as hosts and guests appeared; many of the gillies saluted Glenbenrough and his daughters in Gaelic welcome, and then darted off in advance for the loch.

Norah walked by Marchmoram, who led the way ; they passed the gillies' shedding, stopping at the kennel, where Ralph, the head gamekeeper, stood superior, gazing with a quiet Saxon smile after the wild Highland phalanx flying past in such excitement. He turned with alacrity to show his dogs, which the ladies fully admired ; he also explained the facility for cleanliness afforded by the river passing through the length of the kennel. Esmé lost her meed of favour in his eyes when he heard her remark to Marchmoram that she wished they would dilute with water the unlimited milk used in the canine porridge, and give her that part saved from the dogs for some of her cottage children !

The foaming little river, which they followed, wound itself a tortuous way round several of the barrier hills until it threw itself into Loch Nightach, at the back of the lodge, and not half-a-mile from it. It was a loch of about two miles in extent, and completely surrounded by cold, grey rocky hills. The water, even in sunshine, looked more leaden than silvery ;

but a fringe of birch, which grew all along the edges, gave it a green garnishing. Human voices now made the solitude ring around.

Half-a-dozen men sprang into a boat, carrying a net with them; to one end of the net was attached a rope with a wooden handle, which was grasped by a band of men on shore. The boat then pushed off, the crew taking a wide circle in the water and dropping the net as they proceeded, until they again approached the shore at a distance from the starting point, where the other men stood stationary.

Part of the crew now sprang on shore, holding one end of the net by a rope and handle, and both parties pulled together, drawing the net in towards land; while some men left in the boat kept paddling in the water with their oars, and shouting to frighten the imprisoned fish from attempting to escape. 'Midst yells and barbaric shouts the nets were hauled in to shore, landing hundreds of trout, pike, and char upon the beach; and then such a scramble ensued, the captors

throwing themselves on the living shoal and striking the life out of the fish with stones and oars. Glenbenrough was active and energetic as the merest Highland boy amongst them ; and with memoranda-book in hand, shouted in Gaelic to the gillies as he wrote down the numbers taken in each successive haul.

After the second haul had taken place, Esmé turned to Ishbel and whispered to her ; when they both left the group amongst which they stood and ran some paces off to the birch trees ; not many seconds afterwards, a thin cloud of blue smoke arose, and a fire was blazing on the beach further down. The three gentlemen and Norah proceeeeed thither, and found Esmé on her knees building a hearth with flat stones before a fire of brushwood, while Ishbel was gathering fuel hither and thither to add to it.

“ Does not that look comfortable ? ” Esmé exclaimed, with childish glee. “ I am sure the evening will be cool ; and besides it would be fun to roast some of the fish ! ”

“ And how in the name of all the fire worship-

pers did you accomplish this, Miss Esmé?" asked Marchmoram.

She pointed to a little brass match-box by her side: "This was in my pocket: I always carry it, for we constantly light fires when we are out on the hills. Here are more comforts," she added laughing, as she pulled out of her pocket a little quaigh, a strong penknife, a pincushion, a roll of twine, and a compass in a case the size of a locket.

"You are quite a little campaigner," Marchmoram said: "I have no doubt you have often found all these things useful. I find I can take hints from you in many ways."

"And now you shall see how to roast fish, if you will have them prepared," Esmé said. She and Ishbel then placed two tall sticks, tied at the top, upright in the ground before the fire, and fastening several hook-shaped twigs with string to the top of the supports, she soon had a row of trout and char pendant before the glowing fire. And, as they broiled, she cut twigs of birch into rude pronged forks. But there was no salt

to be had. The char and trout were dull in colour, like their native water, and had a mossy or peaty flavour when cooked.

About a dozen hauls had been made, and between each there were copious libations of whisky served to the gillies; who, heated by these and success, grew noisier and happier, dashing into the water up to their waists and shouting, so that the fish ought to have fled to the lowest depths, as they do when it thunders. Nearly a thousand fish lay heaped upon the beach, and as two carts were driven down and piled with the spoil, Marchmoram asked Esmé if the cottagers would like them for their supper as well as the milk she had wished for. The gillies conveyed away and distributed the fish as they listed.

The shadows from the hills were lengthening, and darkening the face of the waters, as the party now turned towards the lodge. Glenbenrough was in height of good humour, but wet and rather chilled, as he had been almost as enthusiastic as the gillies; so when Marchmoram

expressed his hopes that dinner might soon be served after their arrival at the lodge, and spoke authoritatively of his not starting until it was over, Glenbenrough acquiesced, without even consulting his daughters: his decision once made there never was any appeal attempted by them.

“Norah, dear Norah,” said Esmé, as they again smoothed their hair before the glass in Marchmoram’s room, “has it not been charming to-day? We must know these gentlemen better: I feel as if we were perfectly intimate with Mr. Marchmoram already. I am restless to know more of him, so that I may speak to him without any restraint whatever. And Mr. Harold! that slight dreaminess in his eye and smile—did it not take your fancy? I have formed a theory as to his character already, and it is an exalted one. I think you and he would sympathize in some things, Norah.”

Norah smiled. “And Mr. Auber! he is so polished and so observing, Esmé. You and Ishbel seemed to amuse him: he is not a man to be easily interested, though.”

These girls did not know that they were speaking of men who trod in fashion's highest courts, and who in London attracted the best society in satellite circles around them. Yet, perhaps, these men would be rather judged thus by first appearances, and with frankness unbiassed as the opinions of children. The slightest praise thus uttered was worth all the adulation of the belles of a season ; for it was genuine, spontaneous, and disinterested.

Ishbel had gathered some bunches of the berries of mountain ash and holly, on their way to Dreumah, and made up three bouquets of bright green and scarlet, which relieved the sombre shepherd tartan ; Esmé wore her's fastened with her shawl-brooch on the left shoulder, in the coquettish Highland fashion, but the other girls placed theirs at the waistband. Their seats at dinner were the same as at lunch : Esmé sat next Auber, and Norah by Marchmoram, with Harold on the other side ; Ishbel and Glenbenrough opposite.

Auber admired Esmé's piquant bouquet.

“These are the Rowan berries,”* she said, “and while I wear them no one can bewitch me.”

Auber looked at her and saw how innocent was the speech. At the same moment Esmé felt what an exquisite shadowy smile he possessed. They talked, and the others talked also; but less generally than at lunch time. Harold and Norah thawed in a little mutual reserve of manner towards each other, and favourite authors and many other topics came on the tapis. Marchmoram laughed with little Ishbel, and questioned Glenbenrough, who gave him information on every local point that he desired to know.

Auber and Esmé spoke together without interruption. The tone of his voice, and the soft ease of his manner, were inexpressibly bland and soothing. His low musical laugh made Esmé wish he would laugh again; it gave her such pleasure. She found herself speaking more than he did: he led the way in question

* Mountain ash.

and remark, and paused for a full reply. Whatever it is that constitutes shyness, whether vanity or constitutional feeling, Esmé had none of it; but at the same time she was equally devoid of any *brusquerie* or hardness of manner: she was self-unconscious; or, rather, the ideal with her conquered the material. Her mind outpoured itself through her lips, and she was abstracted as she spoke. Her lips would move and her eyes enlarge as she sat in reverie on a rocky seat at Glenbenrough, exactly as they did now when she listened, or spoke, with artless pleasure, to the polished man of the world. He led her on by interchange of grave and gay remark. It was the first time she had ever been under the influence of the perfect tact of another.

“ You seem to have names for yourselves almost as unique as those for your ponies, Miss Mac Neil ? ”

Esmé laughed. “ My name is Esmé; Miss Mac Neil is Norah. We were christened by these names; but Ishbel’s proper name is Isabel

—we call her Ishbel, as it is the Gaelic for Isabel, and we think it prettier. My dear mother's name was Norah; and as for my name! there were Esmés in our family six hundred years ago. It is a delightfully old name."

"Esmé," Auber repeated it musically. "Yes, I could fancy some traditions affixed to that name; but you surely would not wish, with your living experience of this age, to have taken place with one of the Miss Esmés of those barbarous backward centuries?"

"The Highlands were barbarous indeed in former ages," Esmé replied gravely, "and it would require a most philosophic view to be taken of the pursuits and habits of papa's ancestors in those days. I should horrify you, and make you laugh, were I to describe to you the manners of the Mac Neils not a century ago, and to tell of scenes enacted in the present old house of Glenbenrough by even my grandfathers and grandmothers. But the name of Esmé came from my maternal grandmother's side of our family: there were ladies and countesses Esmé, in

royal courts!" and she involuntarily erected her head a little.

"Do you attach any theories of partiality or prejudice to particular names?" Auber asked. "Agreeing with Shakspeare in the abstract on this point, I still make mental reservation: a rose, when a rose, is sweet by that name; but a biped nettle arrogating the name of a rose in baptism irritates me. I hate to hear a low-bred man addressed by some time-honoured name of chivalry, or to see a ludicrously ugly face with a soft euphonious name attached."

"You have expressed exactly what I also feel," Esmé said, smiling: "but I go further; for, once prejudiced by association against a name, prejudice follows the name where, or to whomsoever, it may apply itself."

Auber called for a screen, as the turf-fire at his back diffused a too glowing warmth. "The tenacity of life in your Highland peat-fires is wonderful," he remarked. "I have no doubt that bright little fire you kindled at the loch to-day is still reflecting itself in the dark water."

“Fire and water are my favourite elements,” Esmé replied. “They are both such beautiful things, and so life inspiring. Do you know, I think the knowledge of fire alone must raise us above the brute creation, and draws an unmistakeable line of demarcation between us. I have quite a passion for pure springs of water, too, flowing on and refreshing the lips of successive generations for ages. There is a very old well at Glenbenrough. It is at the foot of a ruined stone cross on the banks of the river, and was consecrated soon after Christianity arrived with the monks from Ireland in the Highlands: that is nearly twelve hundred years ago. I take a drink from it every day.”

Marchmoram had talked with Glenbenrough, but he had also heard much of Auber and Esmé’s low voiced conversation: his eye also had been studying her face. He now addressed her.

“That well of the cross almost made me thirsty in anticipation, Miss Esmé, as we rowed past it that evening. Your sisters say you haunt it like a spirit!”

“ Well, were it a legitimate future existence, I should like to be a water-spirit, Mr. Marchmoram ; but then I would not wish to be imprisoned in a well : I would revel in sea and river ; in mountain torrents and springs. Descriptions of mermaids always had a charm for me.”

Dessert was placed on the table, and a movement made ; chairs were placed in a broken circle by the end nearest the fire. Marchmoram sat next Esmé, and Auber moved to the opposite side, betwixt Ishbel and Glenbenrough.

Marchmoram said to Esmé, “ I once saw a girl at a ball dressed as a water-spirit : by-the-bye it was as a Scotch water-spirit too, for she represented Sir Walter Scott’s White Lady of Avenel. She had long fair hair like yours, which hung in heavy tresses past her waist ; her face was pale, and lighted by eyes of lambent blue. Silver beads were strewn in her hair and hung on her white flowing veil and drapery, to represent drops of water. She danced in a Waverley quadrille. I could not discover her name or history : she came and went, to me,

as a ghost, for I had never seen her before and have never seen her since. I think I can see her now as I speak, though."

It was time to start. Farewell must be said to Dreumah.

The ponies were neighing at the door : the Glenbenrough cart and men were also in attendance to start in company ; for the moon had not yet risen, and the tract from the lodge, until they should reach the road, was dark and uncertain. The gillies clustered round with flaming torches of pine, snatched out of the fire in their dwelling-place ; and two of the valets also stood at the door with wax lights to illuminate the scene. It was a still dark night. The gentlemen escorted the party a few paces, then farewells were exchanged, and hearty shakes of the hand. Marchmoram called out a parting wish for the speedy appearance of the moon, and Esmé looked back and met Auber's dark eye and soft shadowy smile, as he also waved adieu.

The moon rose soon after they reached the road, which stretched like a white riband through

the dark scenery around them ; and the ponies' hoofs clattered on the rocky surface as they trotted on. The river Rouagh, which they could hear rushing nearly parallel with them on its course from Loch Nightach, now suddenly appeared in sight, sweeping through a ravine, whose steep bank had hitherto kept it out of view. The road spanned it by a one-arch bridge, and the river flowed on smooth and deep until the road again met its course. A gravelly ridge marked a ford, however ; and when this ford was passed the road led on through woods of birch until it forked ; you then might either follow it on for many miles, until it reached the market town of Braemorin, or turn down to the banks of the river again, where a pretty wooden bridge crossed it and led you up to the door of Glenbenrough. This was the route taken by Ewen Mackenzie in his walk from Lochandhu.

As they reached the one-arch stone bridge, the cavalcade stopped for a few moments, and Esmé gazed from her saddle over the parapet. The water boiled in a huge caldron-like pool beneath,

and frothed angrily round the black-based rocks ; which, shelving lower down, let the water loose, and it flowed on in a broad sullen stream until the ford again shallowed it. There were no trees here, and the pool of the bridge looked gloomy always, but grand in the moonlight.

When the ford was passed, Glenbenrough and Norah were in advance, and they rode on following the road ; but Esmé asked Ishbel to take the path which here led up the Roua Pass, and the two girls, alone, and at this late hour of night, wound fearlessly up it, leaving the reins on their ponies' necks.

“ Ride first, Ishbel, darling,” Esmé said ; “ and don’t speak to me, for I wish to think.”

Esmé had been thinking ever since they left Dreumah : the scenes of the day were flitting in mystic colours between her and the clouds, as she rode on, that night. She was too much given to this dangerous tendency—to recal past scenes, and enact them over again in idea. Hours afterward, when all was silent and the lights were fled, she would sit and work it

out;—repeat the intoxicating conversation (whether it were of love or intellect), adding to it all she would have expressed, but could not, before.

Esmé was highly imaginative and of a susceptible temperament, but perfect health and sanguine spirits kept her mind vigorous; though the blood mounted to her brow readily when her feelings were excited, so that any sudden or severe shock to that beating heart of eighteen might have paled the colour in her cheeks for ever. But she was very young: her constitution and her mind would brace with years.

During the summer and autumn months, life at Glenbenrough was enjoyed irregularly (in one sense of the word), and much out of doors. Glenbenrough was active and energetic in his habits; and from the interest he took in his people and estate, he daily walked and drove many a mile through the surrounding straths and glens. In a small library, long converted into his business room, he sat and gave audience to his tenants, and held frequent conference with a

factor, who knew less of farming than did the laird himself.

There were rarely any morning visitors at Glenbenrough; and as the dinner hour was generally fixed to suit the convenience of their father, the Miss Mac Neils were not bound down to hours, and might extend a ramble or a walk to any length of time they pleased. Norah was passionately fond of gardening; and after her morning household duties were attended to, she generally resorted with rake and spade to the garden, and there worked indefatigably. Ishbel's education was in progress, but she claimed holiday time while the fine weather lasted, and seldom submitted to longer durance than an hour or two spent at the piano, or in studying French beside Esmé seated in the garden; Esmé being absorbed in some one of her few favourite authors, and a dumb companion for the time.

Then the ponies were within call, and one or other of them was sure to be ridden every day. Esmé would ride to Lochandu to see Florh,

or to gather water lilies ; Norah and Ishbel must pay a visit at the manse, or go to see a patient some miles off : the latter was a duty which Norah never neglected, and which was a very necessary one. Norah's small skill in medicine was supernatural in its effects as compared with what the ignorant practice of the patient's friends might have been. She heard that a child was ill, and on riding to the bothie* where it lay, she found it lying beneath heaps of plaids and blankets, with head and pulse throbbing in fever, the mother and father seated by a huge turf fire lamenting its inevitable death. Norah asked if they had given anything to the child. "Nothing but the drop whisky to keep the sickness from his heart." Whisky was the universal cure and curse ; and though Norah argued, and exemplified the good effects of an opposite treatment with success, yet if another child in the same family fell ill, they tried whisky again ; and did not Norah

* A turf hovel.

again interpose, no other prescription would be given.

The three sisters seldom required medical *surveillance* for themselves; the healthy life of exercise in the open air which they led in summer, made their eyes bright and their steps elastic all the year round.

When the snows of winter came, their out-door life perforce altered. The hills lay deep in their untrodden snow; and even the roads were dangerous, from their icy slipperiness, to the shaggy ponies, in their rough winter coats. The brown stacks of peat were piled high, and cart loads carried daily to the house from the square (as the farm offices and stables are designated in Scotland); for blazing fires kept up in each and every grate. Books, and work, and the piano occupied stated hours; the former selected from the old library down stairs, with, at rare intervals, a new selection ordered from London, or borrowed from friends: they had no reviews, to enable them to skim a book and to talk of it superficially afterwards. Their reading was

literal, and they reviewed the work amongst themselves with individual criticism or discussion ; and sometimes when a Review fell later into their hands, it was delightful to see their judgment often there forestalled.

Norah and Ishbel worked usefully as they sat in the drawing-room on wintry days ; many warm flannel petticoats and dresses were made for poor children and old women of the glens. Esmé was no worker, but she helped at the simpler parts of garments, or sat at the piano, discoursing music to the others as they sat at work. She did not play brilliantly, but after a method of her own, and her pieces were various and desultory in arrangement : airs from the operas and ancient masters, wild Gaelic laments and stirring pibrochs alternating with German marches and valses.

Her music-books were untidy with pencilled writing, and astounding to a professional teacher would have appeared the passionate words written beneath the passages expressing pianissimo or fortissimo.

Mrs. Mac Neil had carried on the education

of her daughters, with a quiet love and duty, until Esmé reached her eleventh or twelfth year ; and then her health began to fail. She wrote to friends in the south, who sent a good Protestant German governess to Glenbenrough ; and soon after, resigning her children to the care of their governess, Mrs. Mac Neil gently bade farewell to them, to her husband, and all else so dear to her below, and fled away to the untroubled regions beyond.

She had been a devoted, amiable woman, loved and loving in her generation ; and though transplanted from a Lowland home to a Highland soil, the people had never felt her to be alien. It was she who built the first proprietary school in that district, and set the example of a cultivated mind and refined habits to many neighbouring homes.

Mademoiselle Backhacker remained as governess until Norah had reached her eighteenth year, about two years previously ; and then, with longing steps, she retraced her way home again to the beloved Vaterland : the history and lan-

guage of which she had thoroughly taught to her pupils; as also French, but no other accomplishment. She was a good simple woman, very indulgent; but her influence had had little part in the formation of her pupils' character. Perhaps her superstition and German idiosyncrasy had been of a slightly dangerous tendency in connection with Esmé's imaginative bias.

CHAPTER V.

THE BARN BALL.

We 'll bring down the track deer,
We 'll bring down the black steer;
The lamb from the bracken,
And doe from the glen;
The salt sea we 'll harry;
And bring to our Charlie
The cream from the bothie,
And curd from the pen.

MAC LEAN'S WELCOME.

STRATHSIELIE, the large substantial mansion-house of Sir Alastair Mac Neil, one of the chieftains of the clan, and first cousin of Mac Neil of Glenbenrough, lay about fifteen miles from the latter place. His rental and estate nearly doubled those of Glenbenrough, and he showed corresponding hospitality. Merry were

the Christmas parties at Strathshielie, and extensive the autumn battues ; the former held in the good old Highland fashion, the latter so as to delight the English sportsmen.

There were two sons and two daughters of Strathshielie ; the former both in the army, and in the same fine Highland regiment, but at home on leave just now ; and the two daughters, Marion and Julia, were lately returned from an English school. They were contemporary with Norah, and the two families were closely intimate. Sir Alastair and Lady Mac Neil with the young people were expected on a few days' visit to Glenbenrough ; they were to arrive on the third day after the party had taken place at Dreumah, and the girls were thinking of plans of amusement for their cousins.

“ Do let us have a barn ball on the 30th,” cried Ishbel. “ It is Esmé’s birthday, for one reason, and we might not be at home when the harvest-home takes place : besides, we are much more likely to catch cold later in the season, as we did last year. Marion and Julia

have not been at a barn ball for two years, so this one would be news for the next letters to English school friends."

"Well, you can ask papa about it," Norah replied.

"And he must ask the gentlemen from Dreumah! They might shoot in the forenoon, or we could have an excursion before dinner," Esmé exclaimed.

"Oh, yes; what fun to see them dance reels!" exclaimed Ishbel; and she flew down the stairs three steps at a time, to Glenbenrough's business room.

A few hours later, a message was sent to the Grieve (an important personage with the laird, as he has charge of the home farm and servants, and also exercises a sort of general surveillance), whose house was at the square, desiring him to issue invitations to a dance at the barn on the 30th, in honour of Miss Esmé's birthday. Norah wrote notes to Dr. and Mrs. Macconochie, the parish minister and his wife; to Mr. Macpherson of Phee, and a maiden niece of middle

age who lived with him ; and to the factor, Mr. Campbell—these being all near neighbours—desiring the pleasure of their company at dinner on the 30th.

A note was also despatched to Dreumah, with an invitation from Glenbenrough to the three gentlemen, appointing a rendezvous in one of the birch woods on the banks of the river below the house, at twelve o'clock on that day, when a battue for roe and black game should take place, and the party adjourn to dinner at Glenbenrough afterwards. There were universal acceptances to these mandates and notes of invitation.

Next day a carriage and dog-cart arrived with the whole family of Strathshielie. Glenbenrough and his three daughters were standing on the hall-steps as they drove up, and there was quite a clamour of welcome and kisses exchanged with cousins of both sexes, when they alighted. Sir Alastair, a strong, stout man, with a rubicund colour and hair of reddish hue, wrapped in a shepherd-plaid, was seated in the

rumble with a tall military looking man, who descended with a stiff gouty gait, and whom he introduced as Colonel Sternbotham.

Mrs. Sternbotham, a tall thin woman, was handed out, and swept an Elizabethan bow to Glenbenrough and the girls. Lady Mac Neil, Marion, and Julia, stepped out after her: the mother, a stout, good-humoured looking woman; not unlike Sir Alastair in jollity of appearance, and her daughters nice looking girls, tall, and with auburn hair and bright hazel eyes. They were dressed in shepherd tartan like their cousins, but wore fashionable little bonnets. The two sons, Roderick and Patrick Mac Neil, occupied the dog-cart,—fine stalwart young men, dressed in kilts of their regimental colours, and thick green jackets to suit.

The whole party stood on the steps until the luggage was fairly unpacked, and the carriages moved off to the square. Then they were ushered in, Glenbenrough leading the way with Lady Mac Neil and Mrs. Sternbotham.

Sir Alastair detained Norah a moment, telling

her that the Sternbothams had arrived at Strathshielie a few days previously. Colonel Sternbotham was an Englishman, with a fine old place, his wife a distant relative of Lady Mac Neil ; they were making a tour in Scotland, and had diverged to Strathshielie for a short visit.

“ My dear,” said Sir Alastair, “ don’t let them see too much of our Highland spirits (I mean both liquid and natural) ; for they are great disciplinarians,” he added, as he darted up the stairs after the others.

Lunch was ready, and the whole party sat down without further delay.

“ Dear girls, why did you not wear your wideawakes ? ” cried Esmé as she rushed from Marion to Julia, unloosening the ribbons of their bonnets.

“ Hush,” they whispered, looking with dismay towards the Colonel. A slight air of restraint seemed to repress the spirits of the Strathshielie party ; the girls of Glenbenrough felt its influence also. Lady Mac Neil’s usual loud merry

laugh was not heard, and every one seemed to feel an anxiety on the score of politeness.

Colonel Sternbotham talked very agreeably, and sketched quite a little volume descriptive of his tour, appealing to his wife to verify points of time or distance; while she silently formed and organised a small staff of listeners, by her smile and glance enlisting every one at table to join the attentive audience.

Lunch over, Norah proposed showing the lady guests their rooms, while the gentlemen all left the house for a visit to the farm; Colonel Sternbotham being anxious for comparisons of the Scotch and English soils.

Mrs. Sternbotham was scarcely in her room, her severe looking old Abigail in attendance, when Lady Mac Neil rushed from her's and joined her daughters and the other girls in the drawing-room.

“Oh, my dears,” she exclaimed, taking Norah's hand; “you have no idea of the criticism we are all subjected to! This is the very stiffest couple imaginable: Colonel Stern-

botham is quite an absurd old martinet. He never was in the Highlands before, and not in the least understanding our ways, he makes no allowances; but even in England I believe he is the dread of his neighbourhood: he keeps up such strict discipline and etiquette in his establishment. His wife, my cousin, was a nice, timid young school girl when he married her, on his retirement from the army, and he brought her completely under his governance. They have no family, fortunately, or they would be brought up to perpetuate his system of social drill!"

"Yes," exclaimed Marion and Julia; "fancy, we were afraid to wear our wideawakes to-day, and dared not propose mounting the driving-seat; though being in a close carriage makes us ill, and we could not enjoy the views of scenery from the inside."

"But, dear Lady Mac Neil," asked Ishbel, dolefully; "must we have no fun? We wanted to have had all sorts of fun!"

"Yes, yes, dear child; you need not debar

yourselves from any amusement: Colonel Sternbotham has no command at Glenbenrough. But he is not at all an unkind man, only very particular."

" You shall hear me astonish him," whispered Esmé, laughing, to her cousin Marion.

Norah went to the door of Mrs. Sternbotham's room and proposed a walk, to which she assented, and with Lady Mac Neil and the five girls presently set out. Norah led them through the garden, and on the river banks they found all the gentlemen assembled; so they rambled on *en masse*. The scenery was looking most beautiful, and Colonel Sternbotham really seemed delighted and pleased with every thing.

Glenbenrough thought him agreeable, and, in his own simple-heartedness, discovered no pedantry or formality in his guest. Dinner was at six o'clock, and served punctually. When dessert was placed on the table, Glenbenrough informed the young men of the intended battue on the morrow. He knew that Sir Alastair

seldom shot now-a-days, but he hoped the Colonel would certainly try the roe. The Colonel, however, shook his head, and pointed to his gouty foot; he would prefer a ramble with the ladies.

“What are the names of the Dreumah men?” Sir Alastair asked.

On hearing them, the Colonel pricked up his ears. “I have met both Auber and Marchmoram in town,” he said; “the former an *habitué* of the Travellers’, and a most polished, agreeable man. Harold also I have met in the hunting-field in Warwickshire: he is a man of very good connections.” The Colonel looked elated to hear there was such respectable society in the vicinity.

The gentlemen soon rejoined the ladies in the drawing-room; and, after tea, Norah and Esmé played some duets; Lady Mac Neil and Mrs. Sternbotham sat and knitted; the Colonel looking, in silence, over a book of engravings, and bestowing a smile or an occasional nod of applause to the performers on the piano. Ishbel

approached her father, and whispered a long sentence in his ear ; the moment she ceased, he exclaimed,

“ Certainly, my dear, by all means, the very thing : why not ? ” and he rang the bell vigorously, when Cameron, the old butler, appeared. “ Send for the piper, and have these tables moved,” and he suited the action to the word. Roderick and Patrick Mac Neil rushed from the sofa and cleared the centre of the room in a moment. “ We are going to show you a reel, Colonel,” said Glenbenrough. “ My young people are all fond of dancing ! ”

“ Yes, indeed,” exclaimed Esmé, rising from the piano. “ Marion and Julia, you must get into practise in Thulighans to-night, so that you may not disgrace the clan to-morrow.”

Colonel Sternbotham smiled grimly, and looked for explanation.

“ Papa is going to give the people a dance to-morrow evening in the barn,” Norah said. “ It is a pleasure often given at this season in the Highlands, and then we all go and mix

for an hour or two with them. I think you will be amused by the scene."

"Ah, indeed! And pray what dances are in vogue? Reels, and what else? Are you expected to dance with the young men of the lower classes?"

"Oh yes!" replied Esmé. "Reels are the National dance; but there is another dance in great vogue, called Pease Straw."

"Really—and what style of dance is that? a grave or a gay measure?"

"The latter, rather. The air is sprightly, and the figure familiar. A man takes his pocket handkerchief and dances a solo sort of shuffle in the centre of a circle formed by all the other people. Suddenly he twists his handkerchief round the neck of his chosen fair, and draws her by it into the centre, when he salutes her; then, releasing her, he leaves the handkerchief in her hand, and she takes her place in the dancing circle. She then dances vigorously by herself until her choice is made, when she also lassoes her chosen beau, and, leaving the handkerchief

with him, the dance goes on until 'Ilka laddie's chose his lassie, and ilka lassie's ta'en her Joe.' You must dance first with the Grieve's wife, Colonel Sternbotham."

The Colonel started to his feet. "Never!" he almost shouted, and he grasped the back of Mrs. Sternbotham's chair.

"Of course I did not mean in *Pease Straw*," Esmé said quietly. "Although I have described it to you, none of us have ever seen it: it is only danced at the close of the evening."

A shriek from the bagpipes precluded all further remark: the piper had arrived, and stood at the head of the drawing-room stairs. 'Midst the fearful discordance of tuning, Sir Alastair and Norah, Glenbenrough and Marion, Roderick and Esmé, Patrick and Ishbel stood up, forming two sets; the pipes burst forth into the inspiring reel of *Thulighan*,—the piper blowing with dilated eyes and distended cheeks, and keeping time with measured beat of foot.

It is a wild and graceful dance when danced as it then was. The four men in their kilts

clapped hands, and danced in rivalry of fantastic steps before each other; then, with strong but not ungentle arm, grappled and whirled round; the girls in the centre of them entwined their arms, and round they flew with floating dresses. Sir Alastair and Glenbenrough danced with sparkling eye, and with bearing as erect as the younger men: they threw off half their years as the pipes played the dear familiar strain, and seemed scarcely to feel the ground beneath them; they cracked their fingers, and strained every muscle of their limbs. Lady Mac Neil felt young herself as she watched her husband, mentally following every step and gesture.

At last the reaction came, and with an abrupt gasp of the pipes, and a laugh on every face, the reels ceased, and the dancers sank into various attitudes of exhaustion on chairs and sofas: Marion and Julia declared they could dance no longer. The piper doffed his plumed bonnet, and, bowing, waved his hand to all the company; he then retreated down stairs, and faint sounds of the pipes came continuously for an hour after-

wards from the culinary region: the servants were also practising for the morrow evening.

“Let us play at Consequences, papa,” Norah at last said; “it will give us time to cool. Do you know the game of Consequences, Mrs. Sternbotham?”

Mrs. Sternbotham glanced at the Colonel as she answered in the affirmative. The Colonel had seen the game played, but never had joined in it; however, as this was only a small family party, he might unbend. He therefore joined the merry circle; his wife sat by his side to play propriety. Laughably absurd were the couplings of sayings and doings. Sir Alastair shouted to find himself eloping with Lola Montes; and Lady Mac Neil was almost disconcerted to find that her opinion of Glenbenrough was the very worst possible. At last the paper unfolded a scene. Esmé read aloud with stifled laughter—

“*The Personages.....Colonel Sternbotham and the Minister's Wife.*

OccupationDancing Pease Straw.

The gentleman said.....Is this a rational amusement?

The lady repliedDance your steps, man ! dance your steps !
The world's opinion ...They are an ill-assorted pair.
And the Consequences ...She falls down and breaks her leg, and he
retires to a monastery."

The Colonel had escaped all personal allusion until now, but he unfortunately found his name becoming popular on the lists. He reddened and fidgetted : strong were his inward comments on his own weakness, and vows of never again allowing his dignity to be lowered before Mrs. Sternbotham ; but he smiled grimly before the company.

At last the pendule struck twelve, and the butler appeared with glasses and decanters, for neither Sir Alastair nor Glenbenrough ever retired to bed without a parting tumbler of toddy ; but the ladies all said good night, and dispersed to their rooms. As they retired, Esmé saw the Colonel carefully collect every scrap of written paper on the table, and place them on the fire ; muttering some remark about the housemaid and the respect of servants.

Next morning, the 30th of August, the sun rose as brightly as on the 25th ; it was a lovely

sunny day, the air slightly tempered by an early autumn feeling, which, in that clear bracing atmosphere, raised the spirits. Roderick and Patrick Mac Neil whistled cheerily as they shouldered their guns for starting.

Glenbenrough was also going, and a staff of beaters, for the roe woods. Just as they all moved off, some of the Dreumah gillies arrived bearing luggage, which was placed in vacant rooms. Marchmoram had this time sent on changes of dress to Glenbenrough ; and the Dreumah party had already arrived at the sporting rendezvous, about two miles from the house beneath the wooden bridge.

Lady Mac Neil and Mrs. Sternbotham remained within doors until lunch time, and, after that, took a stroll through the garden. The girls divided into parties ; Norah and Marion walked to the square, where the former gave some directions to the Grieve as to making the barn comfortable ; Julia, Esmé, and Ishbel unmoored the boat and paddled down the river. The afternoon was closing as they returned, and shots were

echoing along the banks, which showed the sportsmen were also wending homewards.

It was time to dress for dinner. Norah, on her return from the square, had gone part of the way up the Roua Pass, to seek for a bed of green deer's-grass, which there spread thickly over the surface of the hill; while she pulled it up carefully with its long tendrils, Marion Mac Neil beat down bunches of bright red berries from the rowan tree; then they sat down in the heather, and Norah made wreaths of the deer's-grass twined light and thick, with little clusters of red rowan berries at intervals to relieve the green.

The five girls all entered the drawing-room together, and they formed a picturesque bevy. Marion and Julia wore high white muslin dresses, with bows of royal Stuart tartan. This is the only legitimate tartan for universal use: in the Highlands no one would generally wear the tartan of another clan; but, if a change was wished, the royal might be assumed for the time. Norah, Esmé, and Ishbel wore dresses equally

piquant and peculiar,—skirts of a glossy linen, in stripes of grey and scarlet, with loose black velvet jackets, showing the bodice beneath, and stockings of Rob Roy* pattern in spun silk. The natural wreaths, which all the girls wore, seemed to suit equally well the various shades of hair, in auburn, brown, and gold.

Neither Glenbenrough nor any of the shooting party had yet made their appearance ; they took their toilette leisurely after the fatigues of the day. Colonel Sternbotham looked up as the girls entered, and his gaze remained fixed on the unusual dress of the daughters of Glenbenrough ; but Esmé approached him, and said, with a winning smile,

“ Is it not pleasant that we may dress as we like in the Highlands ? We can study our comfort, and please our imaginations at the same time. I should not like to wear silk at a barn ball.”

Dr. and Mrs. Macconochie were now an-

* Check of black and scarlet.

nounced, and the Colonel slightly reddened as he saw in the minister's honest wife his absurd companion in the game of Consequences of the evening before ; and when, in answer to his frigid bow on introduction, she rushed forward and shook him heartily by the hand, his confusion became evident.

Mr. Macpherson of Phee, his niece Miss Christy, and Mr. Campbell, the factor, arrived in a dog-cart, and entered simultaneously. Miss Christy Macpherson was a raw built person like her uncle, with a large sun-burnt face and high cheek-bones ; her mouth, extending into a wide grin, showed a set of huge white teeth, and she spread her hands over her knees while she sat, or used them in strong gesticulation when she spoke. The minister's wife was attired in black silk, and a tidy cap trimmed with white ribands. She was a stout and rather comely woman, and being duly impressed with a sense of her rights as wife of the parish presbyter, she would not have felt timidity in any society whatsoever.

Miss Christy Macpherson was a character : an

excellent kind-hearted woman, shrewd in Scotch sense and utterly unaware of any phases of conventionality: refinement must shrink before her, and pretence she actually killed. She lived with Macpherson of Phee, her uncle, who, with her father, and their forbears, had held the lands of Phee in tenancy for many generations; and she boasted of her personal labours in the poultry-yard and dairy. Miss Christy's dress was more peculiar than that of the girls of Glenbenrough; the waist was short and the skirt scanty; but its value was precious in her eyes, it having been her mother's wedding slip, only dyed brown twenty years ago. She wore a cap which also formed a weekly frontispiece for her Sunday bonnet; and a faded silk scarf, of Macpherson tartan, was pinned on either shoulder.

The assembled company in the drawing-room of Glenbenrough formed a charming study to the eyes of the Dreumah party as they entered: Esmé saw it all, themselves included, as she sat in the shade of the window.

The five daughters of Clan Mac Neil might

have made a tableau for admiration anywhere. Marion and Julia had a little of the restraint of school in manner ; but they had also learnt how to bow and move gracefully, and be quietly ladylike. Norah, Esmé, and Ishbel were utterly unaffected : they had had no teachers of manners ; but natural grace (born as inherently as the virtues) and consciousness of “the blood of the Mac Neils, of Glenbenrough,” exerted all-powerful influence. Norah was strikingly elegant in manner ; her self-possessed smile, and quiet easy tact, both struck and won upon the observer : she might have taken her choice of any sphere, for she would be able to adapt herself to and adorn it. Her well-regulated, but somewhat too reserved nature was too strong in its constitutional opposition to Esmé’s, for its wholesome influence to affect sufficiently the latter. Had Norah’s temperament, warm and true within, been but outwardly a little more open, its good example of self-government would have restrained many of Esmé’s wild imaginative flights.

There is an intuitive gift of graceful self-possession and manner inherent in the west coast female blood of the Highlands. I never yet saw a west coast girl who did not carry her head gracefully on entering a room, or one who stood awkwardly abashed amongst strangers in quiet dignity: they are a match for any ball-room *belle* of England. I have seen a young girl, wearing white kid gloves for the first time in her life—whose foot had never before trod beyond the wilds of Kintail, and whose ear had seldom listened to other music than Gaelic songs on the hills, or the scream of the bagpipe at a Highland wedding—enter with a fashionable party an Inverness ball-room—a scene formidable to her as royal ball to London *débutante*, for Inverness is the capital of the Highlands—and with head gracefully erect, with dark eye proudly searching, take her place and move with quiet ease through quadrilles in the midst of a dazzling crowd. It is a universal quality possessed by these very far west coast girls: and it is refreshing to see

natural dignity still extant in those grand old wilds.

The introductions over, many questions arose as to the sport of the day. The six guns had killed five roe and thirty brace of black game, besides minor game.

“Oh, our dear black cocks!” exclaimed Ishbel, “what slaughter! The only comfort is that you are not likely to shoot so many again this season. By and by they will outwit you, and you will have to go stalking them like deer.”

Auber now approached Esmé, who was seated by Miss Christy Macpherson. He bent low, and glancing from face to face, asked the name and history of each individual; Esmé replying graphically, in a low pitched voice. At last he pointed out Colonel Sternbotham.

“That is an old English Colonel who came from Strathshielie yesterday. His wife is a cousin of Lady Mac Neil’s; but he never was in the Highlands before. His name? Colonel Sternbotham!”

“Sternbotham!” shouted Miss Christy. “Eh,

loch me! his name is no decent! whatan'a name!" The Colonel turned sharply round.

Esmé could not look up; her lip quivered; she felt as though the Colonel was in danger of apoplexy from the shock: but not a muscle had moved in Auber's face.

Dinner was announced. Sir Alastair sat at Norah's right hand, at the head of the table, and Harold, who had escorted Julia Mac Neil, sat on her left; Esmé being placed betwixt Marchmoram and Miss Macpherson. Colonel Sternbotham unfortunately found himself on the right of the latter lady. Auber sat between Lady Mac Neil and Marion, and Esmé saw that he talked assiduously to both during dinner: he always made himself agreeable. The mingled hum of Scotch and English accents was striking; as also was the contrast between the huge red hands of Miss Christy, and the thin, pale jewelled ones of Mrs. Colonel Sternbotham.

Marchmoram questioned Esmé about the company, as Auber had done, and she answered him with greater vivacity. She sketched her

kind cousins, Sir Alastair and Lady Mac Neil, and the family of Strathshielie, in few and loving words ; then touched with mimicry on Colonel Sternbotham, and excused Miss Christy's eccentricities on the score of her genuine character. Miss Christy had manfully addressed the Colonel the moment she sat down ; but he answered in abrupt monosyllables : never had he sat in society with a woman like this. But Christy, wholly unconscious, talked on and fairly carried him by storm, till at last he was heard talking of Edinburgh to her.

“ Aye, aye : it’s a bonny toun. But what thought ye o’ Arthur’s seat ? Throth he was lazy to need a seat when he got to the top o’ a mere brae like yon ! I told them it was jist rough ground only, compared to our hills here. The thing that pleased me most in a’ the sights was the picter show. Ye were in Edinburgh yon time, did ye see it ? ”

She had caught the Colonel here, for he was an amateur in painting, and he discussed some of the pictures there.

“ Did ye notice a cattle picter? The horns on the beast, I could hae grasped them! It was my choice of them all.”

“ Was that a Cuyp?”

“ No; I am thinking it was a heifer,” said poor Christy.

Marchmoram laughed heartily, and Esmé joined. This was not a dinner for continued, or for *tête-à-tête*, conversation: there was too much incongruity.

Marchmoram asked Esmé what stay the Strathshielie party intended making. She replied that Sir Alastair and Lady Mac Neil, and the Sternbothams were to leave the day after next; but that Marion and Julia would remain some time longer at Glenbenrough.

“ Then you must take them to see Dreumah again,” Marchmoram replied. “ I saw no water-lilies in the drawing-room to-day. Have you ceased to visit Lochandhu?”

“ Oh, no,” replied Esmé, smiling; “ but I have had no time since the day we were at Dreumah. I think I shall run away for an

hour to-morrow and go for a supply: they are in such full flower just now. I am always in hope of seeing one of the beautiful lilies in the act of dying: it is so lovely a flower death—there is no pain in it. When the seed ripens in the lily cup, and her bloom is over, she does not cast the seed to the winds and fade, wither, and decay, like earth flowers; but she slowly turns upon her pale face, and rests it upon the water, while the seeds sink in a golden shower back to the parent stem, far beneath the water: thus they never leave their native loch, but flower there for ever.”

“ Well, that is a pretty idea. There is patriotism and dignity in that death!”

“ Have you ever noticed the holly? You know how luxuriantly it grows wild here—quite tall trees. They are the fierce dark green hollies, with prickles like steel; the base of the tree is a perfect armoury of sharp points, but as the branches spring higher, the prickles decrease, and the top branches, which are beyond our reach, have no prickles at all. Is

not this nature's economy? She only protects where necessary, and crowns strength with beauty."

"That suits me, Miss Esmé," Marchmoram said, looking strangely at her, and he quoted a stanza of Southey's beautiful lines on "The Holly Tree," with a touching earnestness that affected her deeply. He then continued — "What a beautiful evergreen the holly is, especially among the dark rocks! How exquisitely nature chooses and plants her foliage. You have no stately oaks here, or beeches on gigantic scale; they would add no grandeur, and look but heavy, massed 'gainst rock and hill. They are wanted for our English soil, to give character to our sweeping plains and vales, and they are our boast as the rocks are your's. But here beauty comes in the shape of tender weeping birches, wild red cherry trees, and hardy mountain ash; their light colouring and foliage blending with the rugged scenery in the full beauty of harmonious contrast."

"Yes, Mr. Marchmoram! The brilliant colour-

ing of the Highland autumn,—does it not strike you? There is such variety of tint in the natural woods; and then the hills! — purple heather, with green and amber ferns, and rock of every hue, from violet to grey; overarched with skies of such ethereal blue! I have read that the blue in the Highland sky is different to that of any other: it is a cold light blue, but so rare and transparent."

"I have never seen the Highlands in winter; and I know not that I ever shall," Marchmoram replied: "can't you describe them to me?"

"I will try," replied Esmé, earnestly. "You know the pines here predominate in foliage during the winter. When —" but here Norah and Lady Mac Neil made the move to retire, and the sentence remained unfinished.

At nine o'clock the gentlemen all appeared in the drawing-room; the Highlanders of the party all in high spirits. Dr. Macconochie cracked his fingers, gambolling like a bear, before his wife; and Macpherson of Phee retreated

to the hall to put on his plaid, whistling, “Up, let’s to the wedding.” Cloaks and shawls were brought, and carriage wheels were heard outside along with confused noise; for the Square was about half-a-mile from the house.

All the carriages were in requisition, but there were no horses: the lads of Glenbenrough always drew the laird’s party to a scene like the present. Every one was in high spirits, and Marchmoram and Harold were quite excited; their laughing cheers mingling with the yells of the men drawing the carriages, and the shouts and whoops of the other guests. Auber seemed exceedingly amused with the start, and the prospects of the evening’s novelty.

The barn was very large, the floor level with the ground. Chandeliers, formed of fresh green branches, hung from the black rafters at intervals, innumerable tallow candles burning amongst the garnishing of leaves. A wattling of green birch extended across the upper end of the barn; having candles and oil lamps ranged on the top of it. Chairs were placed

before this wattling for the ladies; and two rows of deal forms, borrowed from the school-houses and farms, extended the whole length of both sides. Three barrels, reversed, and covered with plaids, having a stool placed on the top of each, formed the orchestra; which was occupied by two fiddlers and a performer on the double bass. The piper stood next them, immovable, with the pipes under his arm, ready to change the tune or music at a moment's warning.

The door-way was ornamented by an arch of evergreens and heather, and branches of birch and holly were everywhere fastened above the rafters and on the walls, which were of rough clay; the floor being smoothly planked.

Upwards of a hundred country people were seated around, and a large band of old and young men stood at the door to receive the party from the house. As the carriages were drawn up, the people who drew them, and those at the door, uttered a shout of Gaelic welcome, which was echoed by all the occu-

pants of the ball room ; and when Glenbenrough entered with Lady Mac Neil, ushered by the Grieve and upper farm servants, there were vociferous shouts of welcome.

The pipes then blew out loud and long ; and Glenbenrough making a signal to the Grieve, that functionary uttered a short sentence in Gaelic ; whereupon there was a shuffling of feet amongst the sitters, and couples rose by dozens, soon forming reels all the length of the room. The Glenbenrough party stood up to look on. Many of the men were in Highland dresses, and a few had ornaments in dirks and brooches ; almost all the others wore thick blue dresses of home-spun manufacture, or grey coats and trousers : but they all were well and decently dressed.

There were many very handsome young men, with bright glowing colours and sparkling eyes, in whom the volatile Celtic blood preponderated ; but there were also heavy figures with slouching gait and stupid faces, low-browed and vacant —the indolence of Celtic sloth evident in them.

The women, too, were very diverse in appearance; some being positively hideous; their complexions weather-beaten and wrinkled, their figures flat and ungainly; not a redeeming point about them: even youth seemed wanting, for they had no bloom whatsoever; but again the eye fell upon a cluster of tall, handsome girls, with erect bearing and bright intelligent glances. The women were dressed according to their position: the unmarried generally in their Sunday cotton gowns, with muslin collars, and perhaps the ornament of a bow of riband; the married, with gowns of tartan or merino, a small shawl or handkerchief generally pinned with a silver brooch, and almost all with the high matron mutch, which concealed their abundant hair as effectually as a nun's coif might do.

There is no charm which the Highland girls prize more than a fine head of hair; and in maidenhood no time is spared in setting it off to the best advantage, on the Sabbath morn especially; for to have the glossiest head in kirk is no slight ambition to them. But the moment

the wedding-ring is put on, the high structure in muslin and pasteboard which forms the matron cap, is also assumed, and the hair is seen no more: frequently, indeed, for the sake of coolness, they cut off the back part, and merely leave the bands, which are seen at the front.

Some of the young men danced capitally in the reel, and with figures as erect as a tree; but none of the women danced gracefully; even those who looked best when standing or sitting, seemed to dance awkwardly: they had no method, but gave little runs from side to side, or bobbed straight up and down before their partners. A second reel was formed, and Glenbenrough and Mrs. Macconochie stood up. Miss Christy seized upon the Grieve, the factor and Macpherson of Phee made simultaneous bows to Marion and Julia Mac Neil, and Ishbel darted off with her cousin Roderick, touching Harold as she passed, and exclaiming, “Follow us with Norah, we shall wait for you at the end of the barn.”

Norah held out her hand, with a smile, to

Harold. “Come,” she said; “you will find you can dance reels by inspiration: you only require to be very active.”

The pipes set up the preliminary drone, Ishbel beckoned frantically, and Harold found himself actually running, pulling Norah along with him, to their reserved places at the end of the room.

The ball had begun; the people were warming, and the second reel was kept up with sustained vigour; such a shuffling of feet and cracking of fingers; some with a broad grin of delight; others, with grave stolidity, making a business of the pleasure. The shouts and whoops grew loud and frequent, and the steps redoubled in swiftness and energy. Occasionally a man seized the hands of his partner, and sawed her up and down, as it were, before him; or, in taking the grand round in the reel, he would give a loud clap to the shoulders in advance, in sign of amicable encouragement.

The reels now progressed in rapid succession. The five Miss Mac Neils were in con-

stant requisition, being expected to dance with all who might claim the honour; the young men generally bowing low, and silently waiting for acceptance; but the old men of the glens, going up with some expression of homely endearment in Gaelic, would lead them away, holding their hand, or arm, in a triumphant grasp. Harold scarcely sat down after his initiatory reel; for the second, Ishbel led him up to the Parish Schoolmaster's wife, a good woman, who could scarcely speak the English tongue; he asked her daughter to dance with him a third; and so on he went, heartily enjoying the capital exercise.

Marchmoram and Auber mixed and moved through the scene, but did not join in the reels. They were both standing at the upper end of the barn, when Miss Christy approached, gestulating in haste, her eye glancing along the seats.

“ Hiest ye, hiest ye ! ” she exclaimed: “ The laird's waiting for a couple till dance, forntent him. Colonel, ye 'll do fine ! ” and she grasped

Colonel Sternbotham by his arm. She waited for no reply or demonstration of refusal; but literally dragged him off. The pipes struck up—his voice was lost in the din, and he arrived, breathless with surprise and indignation, where Glenbenrough was already dancing. Miss Christy jostled him before her: he was to be her partner. She caught hold of his hands, and calling out “Hie, hie!” with masculine enthusiasm, began the sawing motion previously described. It was all accomplished in a few moments; but Esmé, who was standing near, saw the scene, sprang forward, and, releasing Colonel Sternbotham, substituted Ewen Mackenzie, with whom she had been about to dance.

Glenbenrough was utterly unconscious of the unlawfulness of Miss Christy’s first capture, and as there must be no pause in the reel, she could not attempt to retake the Colonel, but gave her hands to Ewen, whom she found more agile. Esmé attempted a few words of apology for Miss Christy’s conduct; but Colonel Sternbotham could utter no hasty opinion on a case

so unparalleled in his experience: he limped silently back to his seat, and sat with knitted brow and a stony look. Esmé also sat down. Marchmoram approached her; he and Auber had laughed at the past scene, and at many others.

“ Well, Miss Esmé, that was a gallant rescue on your part. I could not have ventured to dispute a prey with that strong lady.”

“ Was n’t it absurd, Mr. Marchmoram? I think I must ask Colonel Sternbotham if he and Mrs. Sternbotham would not soon like to retire to the house. *You* are not tired of this yet, are you?”

“ No, not in the least: why, I have not even danced. I have tried a little conversation, but I find the English tongue not favourable to it. They almost all seem to speak Gaelic only; and those who try English don’t make it very intelligible.”

“ No! do you know that there is no masculine in the Gaelic language; at least, they never translate it in speaking English: and if you

asked [even about] the state of the weather, they would [likely] answer, ‘She is a fine day.’”

Marchmoram laughed, as he answered, “Your remark reminds me of such an *apropos* absurdity. There was a huge black-bearded man seated in that direction a little while ago: there, I see him now. He had his arm rather affectionately placed round the waist of the slim little woman beside him; and, as I wondered if it was connubial or not, I asked him if he was a married man. He stared, and answered in stentorian voice, ‘No, I am a Maa-ed man! ’* Fancy such a bachelor so profaning the sweet term of maid.”

Esmé could not help laughing, though she wished her poor countryman had not made such a fool of himself. She asked Marchmoram if he was not struck with the difference in personal appearance amongst the women present.

“Yes, Auber and I especially noticed it; and we think the girls dispersed so few and far over

* A fact. . .

the Dreumah country are more generally pretty than the *tout ensemble* here to-night. Some of these women are unfortunately plain."

"Well, the two classes of plain and pretty in the Highlands divide very equally into agricultural and pastoral. I could point out the *locale* of the different women here almost from their appearance. Those old looking, weather-beaten women sitting on the other side, with their huge hands and ungainly figures, are all the sisters or wives of crofters; or they work as farm servants to the small arable tenants. They labour quite as hard as the men, and are exposed almost as much to the weather: they drive carts and load them, reap the corn, till the ground, and work from morning till night; they are ill fed, and lose all bloom and freshness at an early age. Those tall, erect women there, in a group, come from the hills beyond Dual Ghu, where herds of cattle feed on natural grass, and the goats scramble in flocks amongst the rocks; they make butter and cheese in their open-air dairies in summer,

and spin the wool of their sheep in winter, and so have no rude labour to degrade them. All the country about Dreumah, not devoted to the deer, feeds only sheep and black cattle, so the people there are pastoral in appearance.”

“ And, consequently, well-looking,” Marchmoram said. “ I must mention this deduction of your’s to Auber, Miss Esmé: it is a perfectly reasonable one.”

“ Oh, here is what I dislike! and yet that is selfish, for I am afraid the people like it very much. Look, the dancing will cease for a little.”

The people all filed to the sides of the barn as the Grieve now emerged from a side door with a large kettle in one hand, and a glass in the other, two men following, carrying plates of oat-cake. He approached Glenbenrough, and poured out a bumper of hot whisky toddy. Other attendants appeared in succession, also carrying kettles, jugs, and glasses. Glenbenrough advanced to the centre, and then, uttering distinctly a few sentences, in Gaelic, of good will

and welcome to his people, quaffed off his bumper. A loud buzz and murmur ran round the room, as an old man, with long white hair and dressed in a suit of dark blue woollen, now advanced and, holding a glass full above his head, paused while glasses were filled round. He then with great gesticulation made a speech in Gaelic, and, clasping Glenbenrough's hand with one of his, turned and called out the Gaelic signal, at a toast, of "Neish, neish, neish!"* The words were repeated with magic celerity by all the men, and then followed a burst of cheering, as they all drank to the clan of Mac Neil and the roof-tree of Glenbenrough.

The excitement increased and subsided, then increased for several minutes. Some of the old men sprang forward and shook their beloved laird's hand; and exclamations in Gaelic and English continued, until all the people present had emptied their glasses: about a dozen of the latter did duty for the whole company.

* Now, now, now.

Colonel Sternbotham saw Miss Christy drain off a glass-full, after three kilted men had just had the same glass at their unclean lips. Miss Christy caught his eye in a glare of appalled interrogation ; and she winked, and nodded amiably to him from the distance. The Colonel shut his eyes : the woman was painful to vision, morally and mentally.

“ Whisky toddy will now make frequent circuit,” Esmé said to Marchmoram ; “ there will be rounds after every few reels.”

She rose and went towards Norah, who was standing near the door with Lady Mac Neil and her cousins, and whispered a few words. Norah nodded, and Esmé stepped through the crowd of country people and went out at the door into the open air.

CHAPTER VI.

ANGUS OF THE HAMMER.

My golden flagons I would fill
With rosy draughts from every hill.

My gay companions should prolong
The feast, the revel, and the song
To many a sportive hour.

CAMPBELL.

IT was a lovely still night, the moon shining in harvest brightness, and the pure cool air was a delightful change from the heated atmosphere of the barn, where the odours of peat smoke from homely garments, and the fumes of hot toddy were now becoming perceptible. The moonlight was brightening with its mellow radiance the grand scenery around, rocks and

trees casting dark shadows that made the light more brilliant. The sound of the pipes and the shouts of the dancers came subdued on the open air. Esmé moved on to the road, and stood still for an instant. A step was heard, and Auber stood beside her.

“Where are you going, Miss Esmé? You passed me like a ghost, as I stood without just now, also admiring this Highland moon.”

“I am going to the house to see if supper is ready, as Norah thinks Mrs. Sternbotham and Lady Mac Neil are tired,” she replied; “and I shall tell Cameron to come and announce it as soon as possible. Do not come with me, for I must run.”

“And do you think I can’t run, too, Miss Esmé?” asked Auber, laughing. “Let us try who’ll win the race.”

“Well—off!” Esmé laughed, and bounded forward like a young deer. They passed Florh with her son Huistan, the shepherd, who were coming thus late to the ball, from Lochandhu, and had just descended the Roua Pass. Florh

turned and looked after Esmé and Auber flying side by side in the moonlight. She spoke in Gaelic to Huistan.

“Where gaes my young roe with yon English fallow buck?”

“Not far, ye may be sure, mither,” Huistan replied: “its pretty rinning.”

“I dinna like the match,” Florh said, drily. “Let us gae on to the dance.”

Auber’s gallantry would not allow him to beat Esmé, and they reached the hall door together. He sat down on the lowest step, and said,

“Here I shall meditate until you challenge me to return.”

“That will be soon,” cried Esmé, as she ran up the steps; and not many minutes after she re-appeared at the open door.

“Good old Cameron promises to announce supper in half-an-hour, Mr. Auber, so I shall return to tell Norah now.”

“Well, shall we run? Methinks this night is too beautiful to be viewed so hastily; pray let us admire it, and walk.”

They moved slowly on.

“ You will have several hours of the open air to-night,” Esmé said ; “ and I envy you your ride back to Dreumah. I have generally felt more enjoyment during these night hours than in the day time ; I mean not only in the dreamy sense of peace and repose, but also in exercise and stirring intellectual excitement. The scenery looks grander in the gloaming light, Mr. Auber, and one’s thoughts seem to enlarge with it. It may be fanciful, but I feel as if the uncertainty of the light around suited the vagueness of human speculation ; and imagination may venture on bolder flights than in the sunshine.”

Esmé spoke as if soliloquizing, rather than to Auber ; but a secret sympathy influenced her. Had she been walking with any other person at the time, she would probably have been silent.

Auber lowered his voice, as he replied,

“ Reveries of the night have always more or less sadness to me. Excitement, even intellectual, must subside as the colours of sunset

fade. Even the glories of moon and stars in all their heavenly beauty cease to dazzle a worn out gaze."

She looked up at his pale, dark face, as he continued,—

"There is a beautiful sonnet I once read as a boy, which has given me soothing pleasure on many a moonlight night. I will repeat it to you," and in deep thrilling tones he recited it to Esmé.

"Mysterious Night ! When our first parent knew
Thee from report divine, and heard thy name,
Did he not tremble for this lovely frame,
This glorious canopy of light and blue !
Yet, 'neath a curtain of translucent dew,
Bathed in the rays of the great setting flame,
Hesperus with the host of Heaven came,
And, lo ! Creation widened in man's view.
Who could have thought such darkness lay concealed
Within thy beams, O Sun, or who could find,
Whilst fly, and leaf, and insect stood revealed,
That to such countless orbs thou mad'st us blind ?
Why do we, then, shun Death with anxious strife,—
If Light can thus deceive, wherefore not Life?"

"Oh, that is beautiful ! that is philosophic beauty !" Esmé exclaimed when he ceased.

“The man who wrote it died an atheist,” Auber replied.

“An atheist! how wretched. His mind to become darkened; those high thoughts to become as foolishness!” Esmé exclaimed.

“Yes; his mind darkened, in that he went mad, I believe,” Auber said, and they walked on a few steps in silence.

Esmé sighed deeply. She then spoke in the same absent way as at first, but yet as if seeking sympathy.

“Mr. Auber, have you ever felt that you only enjoy an interchange of ideas on nature after the scene has passed? I mean that, if I felt the moon were shining exquisitely at night, and I stole to the window to gaze, it would jar on my feelings were another to join me: any approaching step or breath would at once break the charm of my reverie. Were I sitting on the sands watching the sun-set on the sea, or gazing from the window at a battle of the snow with our hills it would be the same. It may sound very unlovable, but I am sure if

I ever had any very great or dreadful grief I would have no pleasure in sympathy ; I would feel as if no human heart or voice could reach my heart, and I must be left alone in my bitter sadness.”

Esmé, as she spoke, looked lovable in feminine beauty : a shade of sadness was on her upturned face, and on the eyes of soft dark blue, where subdued fire burned in the dilated pupils. Auber felt how dangerous might be that combination of intellect and loveliness ; but he smiled : it was not dangerous to him. He stood upon vantage ground — on a pinnacle reached after years of past struggling.

Hope, truth, and love ; passion, remorse, and satiety ; he had tasted all these, fought against them, enjoyed and endured. The battle was over, and he had come out a wiser, but not a better man. He need now but observe others. He stood immovable and isolated on the barren vantage ground of heartlessness.

“ Esmé,” he said, looking down on her fair pale face, and speaking with that smile which

was so peculiar and so fascinating in him, " You have not found sympathy yet; but when you marry you will. The intimacy of that mysterious union would be required by you ere the inner life could mingle with the outer. No friendship, nor even what is called love, could suffice with your temperament; but in marriage all would be altered, all satisfied. In that state your heart and soul would find egress, blending together in meeting those of your husband. There would be no thought hidden or unexpressed: every thought would fly for support to his. There will be for you no perfect enjoyment of a beautiful moonlight night like this until that second and stronger self has joined you, and your breathing has broken the stillness together. This is your nature and temperament; when you marry you will realize it."

Esmé looked up and met his dark eye with a gentle, earnest gaze. She did not seem to think it strange that he should so confidently speak of her inward being; nor did

she doubt the truth of what he had said. She felt the influence of his knowledge, and listening thus, she realized in part his words. Pure herself, she innocently yet excitedly enjoyed this sympathy: with feelings wholly spiritual she endeavoured to meet this mind, which, in its superiority, stooped to hers.

As they advanced to the door, Auber suddenly started, and drew Esmé back by her arm, as an unearthly-looking spectre appeared in the path before them. Leaning against the trunk of a tall fir-tree, with head thrust forward as if intently listening, appeared a gigantic half naked man, who waved them back with furious gestures. His face was grey and gaunt, and masses of coarse red hair hung matted to his shoulders; his naked brawny legs, covered with reddish hair, straddled Colossus-like in the moonlight. With his right hand he wielded a large gleaming hammer, and with the other he held together a grimy smoke-stained blanket, which formed his principal covering.

“ Hush! ” said Esmé; “ don’t speak, Mr.

Auber, it is Angus N'Ort.* The music from the barn is enraging him: he's not safe now."

"How, in God's name, comes he here? What is he?" Auber exclaimed.

"He's one of our fools," Esmé said, as she glanced nervously around for some way of getting past unobserved.

Auber led her up the bank, and they passed close to him behind the trees, his eyes flashing restlessly in search of them. Suddenly he caught sight of Esmé's white dress, and, with a yell like a Gaelic battle cry, the madman darted from his tree and again stood in front of them. He threw his arms up vehemently in the air, and, foaming with rage, yelled out,

"Approach not!—advance not! Hear ye the sound o' the timbrel an' dance? I'll cleave ye—I'll brain ye! I am here on the path o' the Lord to save ye from the perdition o' hell. Hear ye no hell in yonder? See ye no the flames from the door? Hear ye no the devilry

* Angus of the hammer.

of crackling mirth and the dancing of the damned within? See ye not Beelzebub blowing the pipes, and hear ye no the yowls o' the lost? Gae back, gae back! or I'll rend your souls out 'ere they gae dancing in there!"

He made a rush up the bank, brandishing the hammer aloft. Auber had scarce time to exclaim in horror, when Esmé, disengaging herself from his protecting grasp, stood forward to meet the madman. She held up her hands, and rapidly made the sign of the cross before him; he advanced, and she retreated down the bank, still facing him, and holding her hands up in the form of the cross; the madman following, subdued.

"Go home, Angus! Go home to your aunty Bab," Esmé kept saying; "she can't say her prayers until you go home."

When she got near enough to the door, the burst of sound from within seemed again to rouse the fury of the madman; but turning away from her uplifted hands, he rushed howling towards the wood, disappearing from sight;

but the strokes of his hammer smiting the trees, along with his yells, reverberated until he was far in the distance.

“If I had not held up my arms in the form of the cross, he would have attacked us,” Esmé said, as Auber the next moment joined her. “He is religiously mad: the most dangerous kind amongst our Highland madnesses, and that was the only way to calm him.”

“How, in Heaven’s name, is he allowed to go loose?” Auber exclaimed.

Esmé smiled. “There are no lunatic asylums within a hundred and sixty miles of this. Every district of the Highlands has its average number of wandering ‘fools:’ in general they are very harmless, and we like them. The Highlanders are very superstitious, too, on this point, and would not be guilty of harshness or unkindness to one of them on any account: no one ever turns a fool from the door, or refuses him charity. There is daft Jock, who almost lives in the Glenbenrough kitchen; he is a clean, harmless creature: you ’ll see our servants dancing

with him to-night. And there was 'Foolish Jeanie,' whom we liked to walk with, as children. She was quite an improvisatore in Gaelic, and a vision seer. This Angus N'Ort, however, comes of a mad family, and we are afraid of him: papa could tell you a most horrible story of him.* He was brought up as a blacksmith (whence his name), but went mad on religion twenty years ago, and he takes dangerous fits if excited by any merry-making. He lives in a hovel beyond the Roua Pass, with an old aunt who is crazy on some points, too, and has never been known to speak since the death of Angus's mother. She sits, from morning to night, at her cottage door knitting stockings; and—is it not curious?—she is always seen knitting at the heel: no one ever saw her begin or end a stocking, and yet she has piles of them made and stored away. Her only luxury is snuffing, which she delights in."

* This fool went to the lonely church-yard on the hill where his mother had lately been buried, dug up her coffin with his nails, and when found was proceeding, the country people said, to make the feast of the ghoul.

"I consider this state of things more original than pleasant," Auber replied, as they again entered the barn.

A country dance was forming, and had already reached half-way down the room; but as not a third of the country people present could reach that complexity of figure, it was more select than the universal reels had been. Glenbenrough and Lady Mac Neil were to lead it off; Norah and Harold stood next; Marion, Julia, and Ishbel, allotted to the schoolmaster, factor, and grieve, stood near. The whole family party, with the exception of Colonel and Mrs. Sternbotham, were to be engaged, and the fiddlers moved uneasily in their seats, evidently impatient to use their bows.

Marchmoram was standing at the door as Esmé and Auber entered, and instantly claimed her, saying he had received strict injunctions to do so, for the country people required as great an admixture of the gentry as possible, since many, being ignorant of the dance, must take an initiatory lesson from them. Auber sat down, as

Esmé and Marchmoram took their places, and Florh Mackenzie and the Glenbenrough game-keeper came and stood next them. The fiddles gave a flourish, and with cross hands and down the middle, away flew the laird and Lady Mac Neil, her ample dress fluttering back on the breeze like a ship scudding with full sails.

Couples followed in quick succession : Ishbel went down at full speed, the grieve, a short stout man, puffing and panting in his efforts to keep up with her. Norah and Harold flew along also, laughing as they danced ; the fiddles played fast and furiously, and it was necessary to keep up a rapid pace to avoid collision as the couples increased in number. Down they came in close pursuit, old and young, stout and thin, active and awkward ; and then, when the leaders turned, on reaching the wall at the end, the sudden stoppage of the living stream made them surge in a heaving mass for a moment or two, till the retrograde impulse came, and back they went in an overwhelming torrent to the top again. There was an occasional little

shriek when a hob-nailed shoe struck a satin slipper, but every one was laughing and dancing with all their might. Marchmoram shielded Esmé with a strong arm and bore her along in safety throughout, till they had reached the end and there was a respite; when he crossed over to her side.

There were three men standing together not far off, one of whom had frequently attracted Esmé's attention, principally by his appearance, but also by a feeling that his gaze was often stedfastly fixed upon herself. He was a short, slight man, with a lithe, agile figure, dressed in black, which made his olive complexion look still darker. The expression of his face varied much, but an unpleasant sinister character predominated: it indicated thought, suavity and deep cunning. The eyes were dark and restless and the lip had a sarcastic smile almost like a sneer. There was nothing vulgar in the face—it showed knowledge of life, and a sense of power. Altogether it was very superior to what was requisite for a good valet.

Ishbel observed this man, too, as she rested for a moment by Esmé.

“Those are your three English valets, are they not, Mr. Marchmoram?” she said: “which of them is your’s?”

“You must guess that, Miss Ishbel,” he replied.

“Well, there is the staid, grey-haired man, and that grand, tall, stiff man, and this one whose name I wish to know, as well as his master’s: he is not like a servant.”

“I think that must be Mr. Auber’s servant,” Esmé said; “the dark-eyed, restless looking man whom Ishbel notices.”

“Why Auber’s?” Marchmoram asked.

“Because there is more in his face than in the others. There is some romance in that man,” Esmé replied, innocently, yet gravely.

Marchmoram smiled, but bit his lip a little discomposedly, and answered rather sharply,

“Well, Miss Esmé, that hero is Gupini, Harold’s *ci-devant* Italian courier; and Harold is not romantic! Auber, possesses the stiff,

tall, pompous man, who ministers most assiduously to his bodily comforts, and whom Auber consequently fully appreciates. The elderly man is my respectable old Greaves."

"Look, Gupini is going to dance with bonny Jeanie Cameron," Ishbel exclaimed, as the Italian, turning from his compeers, advanced to where a rosy-cheeked Highland girl sat on a bench beside a wrinkled old shepherd: "he chooses the *belle* of the ball."

"Yes, that is a pretty girl, certainly," said Marchmoram; "and I think her face is not altogether unfamiliar to me."

"No; you must have seen her near Dreumah. Her father is a shepherd there; and her grandfather is the celebrated old poacher, Tan Mohr."

"Ah," replied Marchmoram; "I take interest in her, then!—certainly a pretty girl."

"Aneil! mallachad agad!"* muttered a voice in Gaelic, so close to them, and so deep, that the girls both started.

* "No, curses on you!"

“What a horrid, jealous disposition Ewen has,” Ishbel whispered to Esmé, as she turned and frowned at Ewen Mackenzie, who was scowling vindictively at Marchmoram.

“That girl is betrothed to Ewen Mackenzie, Esmé’s foster-mother’s son,” she added aloud to Marchmoram.

“Don’t you admire our old nurse, Florh Mackenzie?” asked Esmé, as Florh moved off to dance in the centre. “You know she lives at Lochandhu, where the water-lilies grow.”

“Yes, she is a fine specimen of a robust Highland woman. You seem attached to her; you gave her a warm embrace that day when first I saw you.”

Esmé slightly reddened. “I did not see you when I rode away. A foster-mother reckons as a close connection here: one of our cousins is a foster-son of her’s, and I believe she loves both him and me quite equally with her own children. Florh has a great deal of character, and is very shrewd and sensible. I respect her knowledge in many things; but you would laugh

if I told you what wonderful nonsense I was consulting her about on that day at Lochandhu."

"Do tell me! I like to laugh when you do. What were you consulting her about?"

"A dream. My superstitions do not generally run away in dreams; but Florh has always had implicit faith in them, and even in the nursery used to read them for us; so I told her a rather unusual one I had dreamt the previous night, and she divined it with mysterious rites: at least, she read a sort of vision of clouds that I described to her before the dream. With all my own fantastic views of the clouds, I never could have twisted them into the shapes that she did."

At this moment the music ceased, and the country dance broke up. Marchmoram gave Esmé his arm.

"You must describe all the scene to me; both your vision and her interpretation. My curiosity is excited."

"I will tell you at supper time," said Esmé, smilingly; "see, papa is going."

“ Oh, 'ere we leave, pray give me the history of that patriarchal looking old man who proposed your papa's health. I particularly wished to ask you.”

“ There ! that is old Macrae of Dual Ghu. Many a happy day we have spent at Dual Ghu. It is a very wild part of papa's property ; a sort of valley or corry of natural grass, which winds and spreads amongst the hills of Dual Ghu. There is not a tree there, and not much heather,—only huge rocky ranges, and these plats of natural grass growing there for ages. In the olden times, when the Highland families lived so primitively, and principally by their cattle, there were always these places of natural grass amongst the hills ; where, in summer, the cattle were driven for change of pasture. All the ladies of the family moved regularly with them, and lived in shealings erected for the purpose, and superintended all the dairy labour ; and now the cattle on Highland properties are always driven, at a certain season, to these hill grazings ; and the dairy-maids go with

them and live in shealings on the same sites where our grandmothers did. But papa had pasture nearer home, and old Macrae has had the Dual Ghu for more than fifty years: he has large herds of his own there, and lives quite like an old patriarch. Generally, once in every season, papa goes there to shoot the grouse on the hills, and he has often taken us, for you can't fancy how different the air is: it is a complete change from even the pure air here."

"I can imagine that; absence of wood makes a great difference even in a local climate," Marchmoram said, as he joined with Esmé in the procession which Glenbenrough was mar-shalling.

As they all moved in a body to the door, the people stood up with one accord and cheered with might and main. There was a rush amongst the men, and the barn was nearly emptied as they clustered round the carriages in wait-ing; and when all who chose were seated, away they went drawing the vehicle with the speed of horses, and shouting until they reached

the hall door. They then all returned back again at the same pace, and dancing went on with unabated vigour until near the early breakfast hour next morn.

The hay-loft at the square had been converted into a supper-room, and the distant cheering, as the people sat there drinking Highland toasts in whisky, reached the ears of the party at supper in the mansion house. Colonel Sternbotham had observed to Glenbenrough, ere they left the barn, the general appearance of sobriety ; and that, though the bearers with the kettles of hot toddy made, latterly, frequent circuits, there were no evident ill effects. Glenbenrough assented to this truth ; but next day, alas ! the Colonel made a fatal discovery. He found that absence of proof was the only merit, and this belonged to the grieve. As the Colonel walked through the square with Sir Alastair Mac Neil towards noon next day, the grieve was in the act of opening the door of a small inner barn, the flooring of which was covered with loose straw, and on the straw sat and stood various

men looking very sheepish, and in various stages of recovery.

“ What’s the matter? did an accident happen last night?” Colonel Sternbotham asked in consternation at the door.

The grieve and the patients grinned together, as the former replied,

“ Hout ava! It’s but the fule chiels that got fou! The laird ordered me get these quarters ready afore the gentry wad be scandalized, and aye as a lad got fou last night, we pat him in here oot o’ sight, and harm’s way. The laird’s aye mindful!”

“ Well done, Grieve,” said Sir Alastair; “ a first-rate arrangement. I must see it carried out at Strathshielie next month.”

Colonel Sternbotham said nothing. What a demoralized state of society was this! What would they say in England, if they knew he had been present at a scene where such an incident as this could have occurred? Barbaric intemperance screened, and actually provided for!

A hot supper was spread in the dining room at Glenbenrough; a haunch of venison and quantities of game smoked on the table, and champagne was also in abundance. Every one was in high spirits, and some were a little excited: there was a sort of scramble for places. Marchmoram and Esmé entered last; no seats seemed unoccupied until Auber's eye perceived a vacant space near himself and Norah. He called out quickly, "Godfrey, here! come here!" and Marchmoram instantly accepted the offered seats for himself and Esmé.

As Auber called out Marchmoram's Christian name Esmé gave an electric start and turned pale; but no one had noticed it. They were scarcely seated, and supper commenced, when he asked her to tell him now the promised vision of Lochandhu; but Esmé said she had changed her mind: she could not tell it. Marchmoram laughed, and said it was unfair; she must not change her mind. Esmé tried to turn the subject, and told him that one of her great grandmothers had been born in Aberdeen-

shire, and any one who could claim connection with that Scottish county possessed the privilege of changing her mind as often as she pleased. Marchmoram saw that she really seemed uncomfortable; but he did not like being baffled: he told her he must find out her vision, even though he should have recourse to clairvoyance.

“Well, I know you never shall find it out,” Esmé said, “for no one knows it save myself and Florh.”

The Dreumah party saw a toast drunk with Highland honours for the first time, towards the close of supper. When Glenbenrough proposed the health of Lady Mac Neil, he stood upon his chair, and placed the left foot upon the edge of the table, holding the brimming glass above his head; all the men of the party then did the same, and even Colonel Sternbotham found himself forced to mount upon his chair. Three times three cheers were given, and “Neish, neish, neish!” shouted by the Gaelic voices present; the glasses were then waved and emptied.

Colonel Sternbotham, poor man, was infirm, and became unsteady in his attitude; so, to save himself from falling, he staggered down, and the glass jerking out of his hand, it alighted, with its contents, on Miss Christy's lap.

“Bonne! bonne!” she cried. “My mither's marriage goun. Could na' a body keep sober, an' no spoil a body's silk goun!” But the next moment she chuckled again in restored good humour, and audibly asked Glenbenrough to propose the Colonel's health.

It was nearly three in the morning when the supper party adjourned to the drawing-room, and the ladies prepared to retire.

The gentlemen of Dreumah were all struck with the fresh undiminished bloom of the three sisters. Despite the heated exercise of the barn, and the long noisy hours passed, Norah, Esmé, and Ishbel looked, with their healthy blush and wide bright eyes, as if they might have just returned from a morning bathe in their river. The Miss Mac Neils, of Strathshielie, looked paler; but they had been at an English school

for the last few years. Glenbenrough and Sir Alastair saw the Dreumah party start, in a large shooting dog-cart, and wrapped in plaids, on their homeward way: they were, of course, to go by the road and the bridge. Macpherson of Phee and Miss Christy also started at the same time in an opposite direction, for Phee. But the young men of the party again adjourned to the barn, where they danced for an hour or two later,; and, I am afraid, also joined heartily in the closing dance of Pease Straw.

Dancing is a universally favourite exercise in the Highlands, and ranks almost as a characteristic of the people. There is no merry-making there, such as a betrothal, marriage, christening, or welcome-home, unaccompanied by the music of the bagpipe; and this old instrument of northern power, the strains of which worked up the blood of the fierce old Highlanders in battle, sending them in maddened enthusiasm onwards, still rouses the volatile spirit of the modern Celt, the energy

of whose kindled fire finds safer vent in enthusiastic strathspey and reel. I have seen old men of eighty—and joined them too—dancing in deep snow, to the pipes, with hail and snow falling unheeded. 'Tis the bagpipe alone, I believe, that gives this impetus to dancing; for in the Lowlands of Scotland (where our dear music reaches not), the people are mostly of the more staid and stolid type of Scotland.

There are some leading traits of strict Presbyterian Scotland which impress generally the national character of her people, and exist equally in the individuality of north and south; but there is as great a difference in the working of them as there is between the wealthier arable Lowlands and the barren seclusion of the Highland soil.

Regard to parental authority is one of the great leading traits; and this, transmitted from father to son, carries down the strict moral code which is allowed to be a national characteristic, and its fruits are seen in decent fathers, proud of their large well-ordered families, and

emulative of their equality with neighbours' children ; producing the educational system which also, as a boast, belongs to Scotchmen. There is scarcely a cottage in Scotland where "the schooling" is not the earliest object of desire inculcated in its children ; and, if the father dies, the poor widow starves herself for the education of her bairns.

From the lowly hearth, with its homely strict motherly injunctions, and from the humble seat of learning in the parish school, go forth the stalwart sons of Scotia to India, America, and Australia ; thence to return with the rich rewards of frugality, temperance, and persevering energy, oft denied to the more brilliant genius of other countries.

It is the national gift of shrewdness which enables a Highland drover, almost ignorant of the English tongue, to drive his bargain with pawkiness and canniness, with the long-headed Glasgow salesmaster ; and it is this spirit of canniness (unduly developed, I am sorry to say, of late years by English lavishness and extra-va-

gance) which has caused the seeds of avarice and greediness to germinate, disgusting the stranger imposed upon, and which only a very patriotic theorist indeed would endeavour to excuse, by ascribing it to irresistible constitutional traits.

There are, as I have said, other universal mental traits which mark the nationality; but the domestic life of the Scotch peasantry generally scarcely differs more from English than does the Lowland from the Highland Scotch.

The huts of the Highlanders must strike the eye of the English (and would strike the eye of their lowland brethren, did they as frequently see them), as squalid indeed. Generally built of rough hill stones, unclayed, with a low peat-thatched roof, dense and dark with smoke, these hovels are jointly inhabited by man and beast: many and many a family live happily in their hovel on an isolated mountain height, or by a deep winding river; their only wealth a heathery patch of oats or potatoes, redeemed by

the hand from the moory tract around them, and perhaps a few goats to give them milk and butter.

They live there strong, healthy, and happy ; ignorant of aught better in architecture for a dwelling, and utterly undesirous of it. I have seen wild-eyed children on the hills, who screamed when shown a looking-glass ; and a tall, strong woman who had never seen a staircase in her life, and, from very astonishment at the first sight of one, could not ascend it.

The Highland huts (I speak not of the modern model cottages sprinkled here and there on portions of the vast estates lately passed into southern hands) are all built more or less alike, rudely ; only that the shepherds' bothies may boast a longer range of unclayed stone ; within are bundles of wool for winter spinning, hanging from blackened rafters, with mutton hams and goat's-milk cheeses, and a full meal girnel, and other more affluent appliances. The appearance of the people, as a picture, also assimilates closely. You generally find the old smoke-dried grand-

mother crooning over the wooden cradle, with its sunburnt baby sleeping on straw (the beds of the cattle are of dried fern), while the sonsy high-capped mother spins the woollen yarn and watches the lassies tramping the blankets with naked feet in the burn ; or calls to her husband, a great hulking, taciturn, rough-coated man, sitting on the hearth-stone in the centre of the room, to put a bit more peat to boil up the potatoes.

The Highlanders are frequently slow and taciturn, unless wound up to garrulosity by whisky, or by supposed grievance ; and these poorer crofters are indolent and slothful in their small business of life. But the shepherds on the Highland hills are, as a class, almost invariably keen, intelligent, and observant : well read, to make them masters of their important profession ; well proved, ere entrusted with so valuable a charge, requiring energy, knowledge and decision ; and thoroughly trusted in honesty by the master, whose profits almost wholly depend on their fidelity.

The strong devotional feeling, so deeply and so firmly rooted amongst the people, dwells very individually with the shepherds; and, out on their wild night watches, it is at once their comfort and their staff of strength. Few better show the power of religion, in the simplicity and the strength of faith, than these men; for with it they combat the supernatural fears that so abound in the Highlands, and which, if obeyed (as by minds less stayed, and as much prejudiced, they would be), must cause failure in duty and loss of property to their master. No men are more superstitious than the shepherds, and no men more manfully brave it. It may be from the increasing growth and hold of religion, within the last fifty years, in the Highlands, that superstition has proportionably decreased; for, though there is still much extant, there is not nearly so much as in the olden times; nor more, perhaps, than accord with the character of their life, and the scenery of the country.

The lonely brown-coloured tarns, where the

shepherd's dog descends from the hill to drink, frightening away the bittern that breaks the solitude with her shriek as she flies, may well suggest the black-haired Kelpie, diving from sight, and scarcely distinguishable on a dark night from the water. The rowan tree, laden with its scarlet berries, growing groundless amongst the rocks, and the fragrant bog-myrtle scenting the air, have always had power against witch, hag, and bodach, watchful for soul and body of wandering maiden ; while the accursed gambols of brown-eyed hares on a moonlight night, show their distortion of limb ; and a gun, fired bravely amongst them, has sent a track of blood direct back to the kirkyard, whence they came.

Many a strong-nerved man, or prayerful woman, wending quick in the twilight for distant aid for the dying, has sworn to the death-light, flickering, lurid, faint, and blue, on the path before them. It almost invariably burns on the mossy swamp round the hut, where night-watchers sit wakeful by the dying.

Then there is the fatal Fetch, that fearful second self, following noiselessly — the soul momentarily disembodied as a warning, following the living body, and retaining its image, with mocking steps to the grave. The Fetch is not that reflection on the mist which generally the shepherd alone perceives at early sunrise: it comes at unsettled hour and place, is never visible to the doomed one, but follows male or female on the hearth and on the hill. It is horribly palpable, and its dread familiarity is not for a moment to be classed or confounded with those other flitting misty wraiths of outdoor life, of which we shall speak anon.

The Fetch of the strong-built, buxom, hearty mother of the family has been known to enter a hut, heralding in mockery the real approach of the living flesh and blood, and, approaching the kitchen fire, has poked it, and busily proceeded to the domestic duties, totally unsuspected by the on-lookers—silence being the only earthly trace of suspicion—until the appearance of the real person, entering with high voice and step,

and acting over again the scene just rehearsed (being blinded to the Fetch just disappearing on her entrance) has betrayed to the startled gazers the fearful fact of its recent presence. The Fetch has also come gliding in amongst the fireside evening circle, in the pale and fragile form of the farmer's love-lorn daughter, then, in reality, lying in slumber, sighing on her dreaming pillow ; as the sisters find when they go to her room.

In most cases the death warrant surely follows ; but there are times when the Fetch's prophecy seems averted, though sickening anxiety is felt long after its visitation ; and one human means of aid towards this merciful result often lies in carefully withholding from the threatened one the past fearful vision of warning. There are sights and sounds without, though, which belong almost exclusively to the open air life of the shepherds, or others who may, like them, take their lonely station night and morning in deep, solitary, echoing ravines, or by the roaring cataracts of unseen waterfall and lynn ; and that there are sights and sounds which exclu-

sively and alone are to be seen and heard in mountainous regions, neither experience nor science can deny.

More than one English sportsman could testify to his own shadowed semblance keeping pace, approaching, or retreating, in misty vividness on an early morning, when out on the hill top intent only on the motions of the deer; as well as to the creeping sensations of awe, overcoming, on first encounter with the wraith-like self, all scientific knowledge of its simple origin in nature's law: But I do not know if any Englishman has seen those vaster visions of spiritual mockery of life, to which many a native inhabitant of Strath and Highland Glen will give creditable oath—I mean those moving vistas of bloody battle, funeral pageant, or turbulent scene of ancient foray, which have been viewed in shadowy distinctness by breathless gazers far removed from sympathy with such scenes. There have been seen wild flying phalanxes of kilted men speeding before a conquering clan, and every incident of bloody battle and retreat, extending vividly and dis-

tinctly over the breadth of a sunlit hill, and lasting visibly for an hour—the hard-pressed fugitive going headlong in his haste o'er death-steep precipice, the fallen stabbed cruelly by pursuing foe, the desperate stand of despairing strength, the impetuous rally and last repulse.

At one time have been seen with the naked eye furious herds of o'er driven cattle trampling over the distant swamp, urged on with hasty gesture and soundless speed by successful drovers; who perhaps had thus driven them, rived from the Lowlands, a hundred years before; and again, from beneath the form of wreaths of smoke rising slow and dark from a distant hill, has wound the mighty funeral of some departed chief, who thus, on a day of ancient date long since forgotten, was borne with lighted torches and inflated pipes by hundreds of retainers to the far off family burial-place. These sights have been seen on sunny morns as well as on misty nights; and the country people will tell you, that below that battle ground lie deep the bones of many who died there in clannish fight.

As for those other shadows, it was over yon hill side that Macdonald of Stran Shanshie drove the largest foray ever brought home, and the funerals of the chiefs of Grant Aye went for ages back at night by that lone haunted way.

CHAPTER VII.

NORMAL MAC ALASTAIR.

Bonny Kilmeny gaed up the glen,
But is was na to meet Duneira's men.
It was only to hear the yarlin sing,
And pu' the cress-flower round the spring;
The scarlet hypp, and the hindberrye,
And the nut that hangs frae the hazel tree,
For Kilmeny was pure as pure could be.

HOGG.

THE breakfast party next morning at Glenbenrough was much diminished in number. Mrs. Sternbotham was confined to her room with headache, and neither Roderick nor Patrick Mac Neil appeared. The family of Strathshielie were to leave the next day, but Glenbenrough insisted on the young people being left behind,

to pay a longer visit to their cousins. Lady Mac Neil said she feared much it would be impossible at present, but at the same time gave such significant side glances at Colonel Sternbotham, that Glenbenrough, taking the cue, immediately appealed to him for support of his argument; the Colonel thus being obliged to change position, and to become the cause of their remaining instead of returning (for on his pleading for the former, Lady Mac Neil graciously assented), smoothed all difficulty, as there could be no possible rudeness in granting his own request. Marion and Julia looked delighted, for sundry schemes of out-door amusement had been planned by the five girls, even ere seeking their beds that morning.

The day passed in quiet occupation. Norah, Ishbel, and Julia gathered flowers, and the former arranged them; after lunch Mrs. Sternbotham appeared; Norah paid her exclusive attention, and strolled with her and Lady Mac Neil to the foot of the Roua Pass, where they were joined by the others.

With much assistance, and assurances of recompense in the view, they got Mrs. Sternbotham to the top, and on to the Pass ; but when she found herself on the perilous edge, and, instead of gazing on the glorious spreading distant landscape, caught sight of the red precipice at her side, slanting headlong to the dark waters beneath, she screamed and shut her eyes ; and Norah held her with a nervous grasp as she led her, blindfold and tottering, back the few steps, to the safety of the broad bosom of the hill. Mrs. Sternbotham got down quicker than she had ascended, and had seen only horror and no beauty in the glimpse she had allowed herself to take.

Next day, the first of September, was bright and warm, favourable for the long drive back to Strathshielie ; as Sir Alastair and Lady Mac Neil were to take their departure home, accompanied by the Sternbothams, but leaving their two sons and daughters to pay a longer and indefinite visit at Glenbenrough.

It was with a great feeling of relief that the

young people saw the Colonel mount to the front seat beside Sir Alastair, and drive away as he had come; the bright jovial face of the good-tempered Highland Baronet atoning for the sour parting smile of his guest.

Ishbel gave three skips from the ground. “Now do let us get up our spirits! Roderick and Patrick, will you come and have a romp round the hay stacks after lunch? Yes; very well—all settled. Papa, you must come and be our ‘parley.’”

“That I will,” replied Glenbenrough; “so you don’t ask me to run.”

Accordingly, after dinner, the band of seven, with Glenbenrough at their head, all started to a field above the square, where a good range of hay stacks stood. Marion and Julia had exchanged their bonnets for their wideawakes, which had been in reserve until Colonel Sternbotham should depart; and they were all in high spirits like a band of children. A rose bush was declared the parley or safety point, and there Glenbenrough sat, clapping his hands,

and shouting warning, or fair play, while they played hide and seek among the hay stacks.

Roderick Mac Neil was the enemy, and in pursuit of all the others, who kept in ambush each behind a hay stack, while he ranged round and round in search and pursuit, pouncing on a new victim when one gave him the slip, and sometimes having three together flying with shrieks before him. When very hard pressed they broke cover and rushed to parley, where they were safe; and when one was caught, he or she was delivered over to parley, who was to be kept in prison until all had been captured. At last this was accomplished, and Roderick lay down on the grass breathless.

“Now we shall have Fox and Goose,” cried Ishbel. “Patrick, you must be Fox. Who’ll be Mother Goose or Father Gänder?”

“Papa, papa, look who is coming!” exclaimed Norah, as a tall young man in the Highland dress appeared at the gate of the field; “it is Normal Arduashien.”

“So it is!” exclaimed half-a-dozen voices, and Glenbenrough rose up hastily.

“Welcome, my boy,” he said, as young Normal Mac Alastair came up, and clapping him on his shoulder with warmest affection,—“here’s a goodly meeting of the young generation. Welcome, my boy, amongst us!”

Normal reddened as he smiled and shook hands all round; there were five pretty cousins all evidently glad to see him. He was a tall, powerfully-built young man of, it might be, one or two-and twenty. His complexion was sunburnt; he had fair glossy hair in thick natural curl, and eyes of a hazel grey; his mouth was good, but a little sullen in expression.

“And when did you arrive at Arduashien, my boy? and how is your father?” Glenbenrough asked as he again sat down. “Are your traps at the house? I did not even hear you were in the country yet.”

“I only arrived at home two days ago. I told the governor I was forgetting how to shoot, and he allowed me to leave Edinburgh by re-

turn of mail. I intend to find the road blocked up with snow when he wants me to return. Ewen Mackenzie told me of the party here, so I thought I would join you for a few days."

"Well, we must go in until you get something to eat; we can finish this game afterwards," said Glenbenrough.

"No, not for me!" exclaimed Normal; "we came by Lochandhu, and Florh Mackenzie would not allow me to pass until I made a hearty feast on mutton-ham and eggs, oatcake, and all sorts of good things. She told me of your being there, yesterday," he added, turning to Esmé. "I wish I had been at the barn dance; but I know I was not missed—I have heard of it all."

"Well now, off with your plaid, Normal!" cried Ishbel, "and be father gander to the little goslings; we are going to play Fox and Goose."

Normal was ready; and ten minutes after his arrival, and after his rugged ride of thirty miles, he was in the midst of the really violent

exercise, springing, running, and wrestling with Patrick Mac Neil, in defence of his long train of terrified goslings. It was more exciting than the hay-stack romp: each held on to his neighbour by part of the dress, in a long string; the nearest to Normal clasping him tightly by the back of his jacket. The fox, in the shape of Patrick, came, making frightful grimaces and noises in front of the gander, and asked him for a gosling; which, on being indignantly refused, with great flapping in the face of the fox, the latter made a spring, and tried to carry one off. The battle then got warm and active; the fox flying to the rear, and the gander wheeling round, dragging his family clinging to each other after him. When the fox at last succeeded in seizing a fluttering gosling, he rushed with it to a place of safety, and then came back to the attack, until he had succeeded in robbing the gander (if he could) of every one of the flock. Shouts of laughter, alternated with shrieks of terror, as the contest proceeded, mingled with exclama-

tions of, "Dear child, don't tear my dress!" "Oh, do hold hard; Normal, Normal, save us!"

When the game was over, there were flushed cheeks and eyes sparkling with the exercise, but no signs of fatigue. Glenbenrough proposed a change of scene and an adjournment to the river; but a counter proposition of one game at "Engleish laufen" was carried by acclamation. This was a German romp, taught in childish years by Mademoiselle Backhacker, the governess at Glenbenrough. Patrick Mac Neil and Norah, Esmé and Roderick, Marion and Glenbenrough, (who was obliged to join,) Julia and Ishbel, all stood in a row of couples; Normal being posted at a short distance in front. "Once," "twice," "thrice," was shouted, and the last couple, parting asunder, ran with all their speed, and endeavoured to join hands together, meeting again in the front of the first couple. This Normal endeavoured to prevent, by catching one of the fugitives ere she could meet her fellow hand; if he succeeded he took her place, and she stood ready to intercept

the last couple in like manner; and until she thus caught one to exchange pursuer for pursued, she had to act in first capacity. There was no end to this “English running” until the girls were fairly exhausted; when with one accord the whole band threw themselves on the grass, breathless as hunted hares. Glenbenrough was the first to rise and pronounce himself recovered, and then they all walked back to the house, laughing over injured dresses and heightened complexions.

It was a pleasant sight at the merry dinner-table that day to see the mellow autumnal face of Glenbenrough, his kindly blue eye resting with such proud content on his three loved daughters midst the group of youthful faces round; and to see e'en still, in his upright time-worn figure, the marks of a manly bearing, superior in its day to that of the stalwart young men then present: his ready laugh ringing with theirs, and they paying honour to each sentiment that fell from those ever truthful lips. He lived anew in them, in their youthful bright-

ness, and they wished to live as he had done. The piper was sent for after tea, and reels were danced for half an hour ; then Norah went to the piano and played some valzes and polkas. Roderick and Patrick danced admirably, but Normal sat down : he did not valse or polk, and he looked a little sullen while these dances lasted. Esmé said she was tired at last, and sat down near him on the window-seat ; but he did not speak.

As Norah and the other girls rose to say good night, on Cameron appearing with the tray and glasses, she said,

“ Oh, papa, if to-morrow is a fine day we should much like to go and lunch at the little falls of Aultva. Sandy could have the coble ready ; it, with our boat, would take us nicely down the river, and then we could carry the baskets on landing.”

“ A very good plan. Well, I shall be ready by twelve o’clock, after I have had a little talk with the Grieve.”

“ Those who prefer shooting can please them-

selves," Esmé said, as she looked back, and her eye met Normal's. She gave a momentary smile, and he smiled away his frown.

Normal Mac Alastair was an only son, and heir to the property of Arduashien, which was far greater in extent than that of Glenbenrough. He had been educated almost wholly at home, and with a constant view to this succession; and it was curious how the formation of his character went on under this home influence, in counteraction to a strong natural one. He was passionately fond of the Highlands, and hereditary pride flowed through his veins, strengthening the force of early association; but he also had too much natural character to feel satisfied with a view of his life and death as a Highland Laird.

Normal had a restless inward desire for a wider field, and for opportunity of exerting his energies in obtaining distinction in life; but he never could analyse this feeling, or determine how it should be worked out. His mental culture had been cramped by home

education and constant parental guardianship, and he felt he could only give vent to his strong animal life and energy of purpose in physical exertion and excitement. He was strong in arm, swift of foot, and patient of hardship ; and those powers that, had opportunity offered, might have earned him fame and glory as a soldier, he spent in strategy, in sport, and unflinching hours of self-denial and fatigue ; excelling all other men in conquering nature on his native hills. When tired of sport, or bound to physical quiet on a winter night, then the energies of his mind set to work more unsatisfactorily.

As he sat and read in some of the sterling authors of antiquity, or brooded musingly before the glowing embers of his bedroom fire, the cravings for a wider sphere of action recurred strongly to his mind. He would rise and pace the room with burning eyes, like an eagle imprisoned from its birth, with an instinctive desire of liberty but no true experience of it ; and then came subtly, flitting images of

Esmé Mac Neil, ministering intellectual sympathy. From his childhood she had always exerted power and influence over him; there was that in Esmé which roused and made him feel his powers, and also that which soothed and steadied him, too. His secret aspirations were entwined with ideas of her. She was his in heart and soul; but it was with secret love, strong and deep, that he carried her ever sacred in his bosom. Dearer and stronger burned his love, for that his pride concealed it.

Normal's nature was a very reserved one; it was proud, and, as yet, dissatisfied; and not for his life would he have yet betrayed his feelings to Esmé. His fine truthfulness of character, his noble spirit, his high-bred honour, and even his deep powers of thought were all withdrawn from common outward view; and though Esmé well knew he possessed all these, yet the strength of his pride still kept back the certainty of his love.

There is, however, a mesmeric influence

which always announces admiration to the admired, though no outward visible proof could possibly have been shown; and Esmé knew that Normal was gazing at her, listening to her, and would be jealous of her, but she did not know that he loved her: he never, by the slightest sign, showed that he did; and though she felt a strong interest in him, yet the chill of his cold temperament repelled thoughts of love in her. She did not like that perfect restraint which Scotchmen have to so wonderful a degree over passion and imagination—that cold constancy which will love a woman all her life, and yet never warm into words to tell her so: Esmé did not believe in it.

Next morning was the second of September, and bright and bracing as sportsmen could wish; but the girls hailed it as suited for luncheoning at the falls of Aultva.

“ The little partridges should thank us,” Ishbel said at breakfast-time; “ but be merciful tomorrow, good cousins three, for you know we have not too many of them here.”

About two miles lower down the river Rouagh a burn came flowing through a gorge; and on this burn (wide enough to have taken the name of river in the Lowlands) there was a succession of falls, called the Aultva, and which few admiring eyes, save those from Glenbenrough, had ever discovered: the waters flowed and foamed in a scene of utter solitude and beauty.

At twelve o'clock sundry game baskets, packed and fastened, lay on the hall steps, and Glenbenrough was shouting to his girls and boys, as he called them, to make haste and start. Norah, Esmé, and Ishbel were soon at the hall door; they wore dresses of purple linsey wolsey, with jackets of the same material, and dark wideawakes with black velvet ribbons; Marion and Julia Mac Neil wore skirts and jackets of light brown linsey: all five girls wore woollen stockings of purple and brown dye, to suit their dresses; and, as their skirts were short, for stepping through the heather, their various coloured stockings and fantastically cut brogues never escaped notice.

Normal had run on to the Roua Pass, and was busily pulling up some deers'-grass to decorate their wideawakes, when he looked up and saw the English sportsmen advancing: they were turning the Roua Pass, on their way to the house. Marchmoram and the other two gentlemen carried their guns; they had walked from Dreumah, taking the flat of Bohrdell and Erickava in their way, and shooting any chance partridges that rose from the patches of oat field. Glenbenrough met them at the foot of the Roua Pass, and told Marchmoram he knew it could be no sacrifice to them to lay by their guns for the day; and that they must join the family pic-nic, and assist in rowing the ladies down the river. Consent was quickly given, and the whole party sallied to the garden, followed by the keeper, Sandie, and Cameron, the old manservant, carrying the baskets.

The boat and coble* were unmoored; Ewen Mackenzie was in waiting by the latter, and

* A flat-bottomed shallow boat.

he took one oar, while Normal took the other. Ewen made no gesture of deferential recognition to Marchmoram, who seemed to have forgot the existence of his quondam gillie. While some stepped into the boat, and some into the coble, Norah and Esmé were dividing a bundle of fishing-rods by the boat-house. Ewen stepped out of the coble (which was to be rowed by him and Normal) to receive the rods and hand Esmé in, but she gave her hand to Marchmoram and stepped with him into the boat, and the next moment they pushed off from the bank. They rowed lower down the river than on the evening that Marchmoram had been there before, and the farther they went the more striking and beautiful the scenery became.

The rich luxuriance of tangled ivy, wild holly, and honeysuckle, intermingled with stately lime and chestnuts, perfuming the breeze on either bank, was succeeded by rocks and ferns, wild gene and laburnum; then came a sweeping fringe of weeping birches, hanging over the

water's edge, and softening the peaked grey rocks on every side. The river grew bolder in its beauty as they floated on, and the tributary torrents came rushing in dark currents from unseen sources.

Marchmoram asked Esmé if she would sing the little Gaelic song that he had heard once before, but she said she had no courage to sing before so many: she would sing it, if it were nearly dark, on their return.

Suddenly the coble drew in towards a high black rock, and rounding it was soon out of sight; the boat followed, and they presently reached the landing-place, in a ravine which ran up precipitously from the shore, and down which boiled the burn of Aultva. There was no path along the rocky edge, which they all ascended, in broken file, but the weeping birches shadowed the water all the way, until a thicker group in advance quite obscured the torrent's course.

Here Glenbenrough called a halt, until the basket-bearers from the boat, who were scram-

bling after, had come up ; they then all skirted the trees, and came out in sight of the falls. The ravine ran up in rocky wildness, bounding the near horizon, and from the top, foaming 'twixt the split chasm, came the water breaking in its rocky course, to where they stood, into seven distinct falls. The last fall spread wide as it descended into its hollow basin, where, as if exhausted by their everlasting rapid flow, the waters lay sleeping in silent depth at the roots of the birch-trees. There was a smooth oval plot of heathery grass here, along the brink, and the shadow of the trees fell refreshingly on the naked rocks above.

While half the party stood mute amidst the roar of the dashing waters, gazing on the seven falls of Aultva, the other half were busy arranging the bivouac beside them. A table-cloth was spread on the flat grass, loose stones being placed to keep it smooth, and cold grouse and partridge, tongue, poultry, jars of butter, loaves of bread, oat-cakes, marmalade, and pastry were set out in orderly array. Bottles of wine and

beer desecrated the brink of the fall ; champagne was put to cool in the water ; and in a few minutes the blaze of a wood-fire arose at some distance. The air was sharp at this height, and all were hungry. Glenbenrough called out for the first course to be served, and Norah summoned assistance as she hurried to the fire, where some covered pans lay ready containing slices of bacon, quantities of eggs, and cold soup waiting to be cooked.

Harold made himself a paper cap, and presided with a birchen wand, while the girls fried the eggs and heated the soup, and the gentlemen strove for the honour of bearing the dishes to the table-cloth. It was a merry party, and free ; there was no restraint of conventional formality, and no cold stare of surprise at the merry laugh, or exclamations of child-like glee : the men of the world enjoyed the naturalness of all around them ; the freshness of the voices and of the sentiments. Plaids and wideawakes lay scattered on the heather, and the sun smote lovingly the cheeks of the smiling girls, and

gilded as with classic glory the golden hair of Esmé. Marchmoram felt a sort of fascination in the rare beauty of her hair: he would have liked to have laid his hand upon her head.

When lunch was over, the circle broke up. Glenbenrough asked who intended to use the fishing-rods; Norah, Julia, Harold, and the sons of Strathshielie declared themselves in readiness: there were some good trout pools in the river beneath, and they all began the descent. Esmé turned to Marchmoram, and asked him if he would go up to the highest fall, from whence there was a beautiful view beyond. Auber, Normal, Ishbel, and Marion Mac Neil also joined, and they scrambled upwards; the spray making the rocks slippery. Normal took the lead, stepping with the ease and grace of native security: he wore the kilt, which well became his athletic figure.

“Have you never tried the Highland dress, Mr. Marchmoram?” Ishbel asked, as she followed next. “It surely must be the most suited for exercise.”

Marchmoram laughed and replied,

“No, Miss Ishbel, I am one of those who think the manner of the dress can never be acquired; and I object to being laughed at by Highland young ladies.”

“Well, I do think I could discover an Englishman in the kilt at once. We had a large pic-nic at Strathshielie last year, and I at once found out four Englishmen in the Highland dress: when they prepared to sit down to lunch on the grass, instead of dropping on one knee, and then seating themselves as a Highlander would, they all scrambled and wriggled from their feet to the ground, holding down their kilts with the most wonderful contortions.”

Marion gave poor little Ishbel a look which abruptly stopped her; but Auber and Marchmoram betrayed not their thoughts that her description was rather an awkward one.

The view from the upper fall was indeed striking; the eye followed the windings of the Rouagh, amid a beautiful diversity of wood, hills, and water along its banks, while behind

them rose tier upon tier of barren rock and mountain, extending back in endless range. The Aultva came flowing in a broad, clear, brown stream to the verge, where suddenly, through the rocky cleft, it poured down with a rush into the falls of the gorge, and on to the river beneath. They all stood on the edge of the chasm, their voices scarcely heard above the water's roar. Esmé turned to Normal.

“Is not this grand? I should like to see a deer spring over now: something to give momentary impetus.”

She had scarce uttered the words when she gave a piercing scream, as Normal himself bounded forward; like a deer he sprang, and alighted with a rebound on the opposite side. It was a leap that the breadth of a pebble might have made fatal. Ere a word could be uttered, he leaped back again. Esmé shut her eyes and shuddered, though she knew he was safe at her side.

“Normal! dear Normal! what induced you?” she exclaimed at last, in reproach.

“I knew I could do it; and you wished to see it spanned by living exertion. It was very little to me, Esmé,” and Normal smiled.

Auber slightly glanced at Marchmoram: here was the enthusiasm of a mountaineer. It was a gallant exploit, though prompted by pride. Normal was in high spirits as they descended the ravine: he had thrown off all habitual reserve, or shyness, amidst the unrestraint of the merry lunch; and on the river, when boating home, and all the evening afterwards, his sallies and dry humour elicited frequent laughter. His shrewd observation and sense of the ludicrous, as yet confined to a local circle, found vent in characteristic imitations of national peculiarity: and he imitated with sarcastic truth Scotch character, whether in Gaelic gesticulation or cautious Lowland sentiment.

Normal was not satisfied with displaying physical superiority: the pride which pervaded his nature was the latent power which would have carried him on to higher things. As a soldier, with opportunity, that mind and body would

have achieved distinction; but the path was then closed. It was pride and discontent which made him sullen and reserved: the former, from knowing that he ought not to be eclipsed; the latter, from feeling that he knew not how to prevent it. He required the teaching of experience of wider life.

Ishbel delighted in her cousin Normal: she admired his Highland manliness; and regarding him as hereditary lord of the soil and people, she felt a deference for his birthright, and himself. Ishbel danced and played like a sunbeam about him: if he frowned, she would flit out of his sight and be ready to cross his path again whenever she thought a smile was returning.

The whole party were assembled at the rocks beneath, for starting, and the fishing party had caught some dozen of river trout; but, unfortunately, both ladies had met with an accident: Julia Mac Neil, in stepping from one stone to another, had lost her balance and fell into the water, dragging Norah with her; and Harold,

who was nearest, in his energetic haste to help, broke Norah's rod in two. The girls only laughed at their ducking; they were not very wet, as their linsey-woolsey dresses had somewhat of a waterproof quality. One of the gillies was rubbing Norah's dress with dry heather, and consoling her,

“Och, you're no drownded! Are ye no?”

“I don't think she is, Sandie,” Normal said, as the kind inquirer turned to pack the boat. “Sandie is a character,” he added,—“his judgment wants reliance. Last autumn he was out with me at the Dual Ghu, and we came upon one of those dark brown tarns sunk amongst low heathery hills.”

““What's the name of this gloomy loch, Sandie?”

““They ca' it Loch na Bashte.”

““And what does that mean?””

““Deed it's the Loch o' the Baste. They're sayin' in the days o' Ossian there lived a wild baste in it, and Fingal and his men killed it. It used to ate up all the people and cattle that

offered to come the way. But I'm no *quite* sure that it's true.'

"‘Are’nt you, Sandie? Well, neither am I!’ He scratched his head, and was quite satisfied: our doubts were equally balanced.”

The gloaming was falling fast, as the party rowed homewards; but it was a still, calm evening. Of course the Dreumah sportsmen must remain to dinner; and a gillie was despatched to bring ponies for a moonlight ride home. The dinner was late, and when the ladies re-entered the drawing-room after it, the moon was shining in at the windows, disputing the light with blazing pine-wood. The gentlemen soon appeared; and the group of five girls all seated in a circle on the Turkey rug, their white dresses brightened by the glow of the fire, formed a pretty tableau.

“I guess what has been going on here, young ladies,” exclaimed Glenbenrough, as the opening door revealed them; “stories of ghosts and hobgoblins!”

“Oh yes, papa,” cried Ishbel, as all rose up

confusedly: "not one of us could have lifted a hand to pull the bell for lights; you can't imagine anything so fearful. Marion has been telling us a true story of one of her school-fellow's aunts in England sleeping in a haunted room, and being awakened by a weight on her feet; and there was a bloody head, which danced all over her in the bed until she fainted: it happened at Graythorne Hall, in Derbyshire; and Esmé has improvised half-a-dozen still more dreadful stories. Nurse Florh translates ghost stories from the Gaelic for Esmé, and she knows all about our family ghosts too."

"Well, Miss Esmé, pray try our nerves also," exclaimed Marchmoram. "This is the very witching hour, and we shall enjoy the excitement of fear in riding to Dreumah to-night. Tell us of your Highland kelpies and bogles, and we will raise legitimate Saxon ghosts for you!"

So some on the carpet, and others on seats, the whole party sat down again by the light of the fire; but inspiration had passed, or

shyness succeeded, and none of the girls would proceed. Harold was called upon, as Auber and Marchmoram declared that Harold's Hall and Britton Castle were about the most haunted houses in England, and teemed with ancient pictures and legends. He began, and admirably he told, with low measured voice, of the dark-eyed Lady Hildegonde, whose deeds had rendered three of the rooms of Britton Castle uninhabitable to modern tenants. In one, the wailing voice of a child issues at midnight hour from a closed closet in the wall; and, in a second, stifled breathing and gasps for mercy come ever and anon. It was in an arm-chair in this room that, tradition says, the strong hand of the cruel Lady Hildegonde pressed out the life of a fair young girl, whose beauty was her crime; in the last dread room, the spirit fled from the evil Lady Hildegonde; and a demoniac face of triumph, that of her husband who laughed as she was dying, still peers nightly in at the crimson curtains of the bed.

Harold told these dark legends of the past with such awful effect, that some of the listeners shuddered, and several of the fair faces present paled as he ceased. It was almost a relief, from the difference in style (though the matter was, perhaps, still more horribly suggestive) when Roderick Mac Neil volunteered to tell them an anecdote; which could be vouched for as truth by Patrick also, it having been witnessed by both. He addressed himself to Glenbenrough, and asked him if he remembered the step-mother of a niece of Lady Mac Neil.

“Her name was Mrs. Robson, and she used to visit our old cousin, Mrs. Stuart, at Drakehill, where Patrick and I used so often to spend our holidays. Well, that Mrs. Robson, it was everywhere whispered, was a wicked old woman, unrepentant for an ill-spent life, and mamma’s niece could never bear to hear her name mentioned. As children at Drakehill, we used to dread the sight of her old green chariot approaching; and well do I recollect her swarthy face, with small close-set eyes, hooked nose and

large teeth, her tall grim figure leaning on a stick, and rustling in silk. She had a habit of muttering to herself, and glancing constantly across her left shoulder. Well, she usually occupied, when at Drakehill, a room at the head of a flight of stairs, and our bedroom was in a passage at the foot. She had gone to her room at her usual evening hour (she never would remain, or be present, at family worship); and after all the family had retired, Patrick and I stole down stairs on a foray, and carried up from the housekeeper's room, as boys will do, materials for a bedroom supper. We were seated in delight over cold pie and porter, when the clock struck one; and, at the same moment, a low howl, as of a dog, came from the passage. Our door flew open, and I think I can see now the huge skulking dog that entered; black as a coal, and with gleaming eyes, his jaws hanging open, and water trickling from his grinning white teeth. We sat as if transfixed, our knives and forks upright in our hands, as he prowled round the room, sniffing the air and

whining unnaturally. He gave a long drawn howl as he left the room, and Patrick and I, snatching up the candle, ran out after him. He went up the stairs towards Mrs. Robson's room, and, throwing back his head with a third, long, low howl, he entered: the door seemed to give way and open to him, and shut again. The next moment we heard a sort of eldritch shriek in the room. Patrick and I rushed back and rang our bell furiously; the housemaid came half-dressed from her bed, and we hurriedly told her a black dog had gone into Mrs. Robson's room—we were shivering with eerie sensations. She rang the bell again vigorously until another maid was roused and came up stairs, and we then proceeded to Mrs. Robson's room with them, bearing lights. Her room was in darkness, and the curtains of her bed drawn close: no vestige of a black dog was to be seen, but Mrs. Robson lay on her bed stone dead. The house was alarmed, and, in hurry and horror at our tale, all searched, while some crowded together in

that dark room, but no dog was found ; its appearance never was, or could be, accounted for : all the doors and windows, high and low, were still locked and shut, as they had been for many hours before."

" Well, I believe all these stories may be true," said Esmé, as remarks, grave and gay, went round. " At least they are told as truth and vouched by eyesight ; and who amongst us could prove their falsity ? What do we know of the unknown ; or who can judge spiritual matter by material law ? I have no fear, but I don't deny innate belief."

" But you should have fear, Esmé," said Normal, smiling, as he sat on a low stool next her ; " and never brave darkness or solitude,

" For this was seen o' King Henrie,
As he lay burd alane,
For he took him to a haunted hunts' ha',
Was seven miles from a toun.

" He chased the dun deer through the wood,
And the roe doun by the den,
Till the fattest buck in a' the herd
King Henrie he has slain.

“ He’s taen him to his huntin’ ha’
For to make burly cheer,
When loud the wind was heard to sough,
And an earthquake rocked the floor.

“ And darkness covered a’ the hall,
Where they sat at their meat;
The grey dogs youling, left their food
And crawled to Henrie’s feet.

“ And louder howled the rising wind,
And burst the fasten’d door,
And in there came a griesly ghost,
Stood stamping on the floor.

“ Her head touched the roof tree of the house,
Her middle ye weel mot span;
Each frightened huntsman fled the ha’
And left the King alone.

“ Her teeth were a’ like tether stakes,
Her nose like club or mell,
And ‘I ken nae thing she appeared to be
But the fiend that wous in hell.

“ Sum meat, sum meat, ye King Henrie !
Sum meat ye gie to me !”
“ And what meat’s in this ha’, Ladye,
That ye’se nae welcum tee ?”
“ Oh, ye’se gae kill your berry-brown steed,
And serve him up to me.”

“Oh, when he killed his berry-brown steed,
 Wow but his heart was sair!
 She eat him a’ up, skin and bane,
 Left naething but hide and hair.

“‘Mair meat, mair meet, ye King Henrie !
 Mair meat ye gie to me !’
 ‘And what meat’s i’ this ha’, Ladye,
 That ye’se nae welcum tee ?’
 ‘Oh, do ye slay your gude grey houndes,
 And bring them a’ to me.’

“Oh, when he slew his gude grey houndes,
 Wow ‘gin his heart was sair !
 She ate them up, ane by ane,
 Left naething but hide and hair.

“‘Mair meat, mair meat, ye King Henrie !
 Mair meet ye gie to me !’
 ‘And what meat’s in this ha’, Ladye,
 That I hae left to gie ?’
 ‘Oh, do ye fell your gay goss-hawks
 And bring them a’ to me.’

“Oh, when he felled his gay goss hawks,
 Wow but his heart was sair !
 She ate them up, bane and bane,
 Left naething but feathers bare.

“‘A bed, a bed, ye King Henrie !
 A bed ye mak’ to me !’

‘And where’s the bed i’ this ha’, Ladye,
 That ye’re nae welcum tee?’
 ‘Oh ye maun pu’ the greene heather,
 And mak’ a bed to me.’

“Oh, pu’d has he the heather greene,
 And made to her a bed;
 And up he has ta’en his royale mantle,
 And o’er it he has spread.

“Now swear, now swear, ye King Henrie,
 To tak’ me for your bride!’
 ‘Oh, Gad forbid,’ King Henry said,
 That e’er the like betide!’

“However, King Henrie, I believe, changed his mind, for the griesly ghost became transformed into the “fairest ladye that e’er was seen,” Normal added, as his ballad* ceased.

“Well,” said Glenbenrough, as he poked the fire and added huge billets of pine to the blaze; “I confess to feeling gruesome.† Let us banish the ghosts, and have tea.” And Norah and all rising, a busy hum succeeded.

Cameron entered with lights and the hissing urn. Esmé sat down to the piano, and, after

* Icelandic Saga.

† Creeping horror.

a sad Highland Coronach as prelude, played lively dancing music, to dissipate any lingering sombre feeling.

After tea the piper was sent for, and the Dreumah party found themselves soon perfect in the reel of Thulighan. Harold danced in earnest, and bid fair to equal the intricate steps of the Mac Neils. Norah told him it was famous, and that the whole secret was enthusiasm and a good ear; as had once been exemplified in a cousin of their's, who had found himself suddenly the admired of all spectators, at the Inverness Northern Meeting Ball. Prince Albert was present, and the royal eyes followed and applauded his dancing in the great “after supper” reel. Cousin Colin was a tall pale man, and in his excitement danced like one possessed; but when it was over he rushed to the door for air and breath. Several asked him how he had lately acquired such perfection in the Highland fling, when, gasping and laughing, he told them it was the reminiscence of a hornpipe—shuffle and cut—which he had been taught at an English village-school as a boy.

Round games followed the reel dancing ; French blind man's buff, where Scotch or English accent were equally undistinguishable in disguised tones, and gentlemen sadly failed in gallantry, refusing to grasp the pointed stick, and almost dragging forward a reluctant, laughing fair to act her part. Then followed the absurd game of the chairs, which the German Governess had taught the young ladies of Glenbenrough ; and next the game of the ring, for the purpose of exacting forfeits. In these it fell to Normal to execute that delicate task of paying a compliment to and bantering each person in the room ; and admirably he fulfilled it. Marchmoram's dark eye, however, gleamed on the young Celt a little impatiently : he did not brook personality.

At last forfeits and all were exhausted, and Glenbenrough, who had to be up by the dawn next morning, began to rub his eyes ; he would not for the world have given broader hint : while his guests were happy, he was happy and sleepless.

Norah saw his fatigue, and soon Cameron appeared with the laden tray, and the merry party subsided into that sort of calm which generally prevails ere breaking up.

Auber sat down near Esmé on the sofa. She was pale, and her large blue eyes were dilated by the excitement.

“I delight in these games,” she said: “I like to feel one’s life, whether in thought or action.”

Ere Auber could reply, Marchmoram approached and asked abruptly, “Are your cousins to make a long stay?”

“I fear not very long. Friends are expected at Strathshielie by-and-bye; and then my cousins must return. However, I am looking forward to our going for a week to the Dual Ghu: papa has promised to take us there. The grouse must be visited; and some of my cousins will come also, and take their guns.”

Marchmoram shortly afterwards addressed Glenbenrough, asking him if he had ever visited the south peak of the hill of Corrieandhu?

“We lunched within it the other day; and it was partly with the view of begging you to fix a day to come and do so also, that we ventured here in such a strong party to-day. I would propose the day after to-morrow, if agreeable; and if some of the gentlemen are inclined to stalk Stronichie, we would expect them to-morrow evening to sleep at Dreumah, and start next morning; meeting by appointment at the foot of Corrieandhu--say at one o’clock: yourself and the ladies might ride, and, taking a short cut, would thus start from home comfortably after breakfast: I will take care that we sportsmen shall receive you punctually.”

There was some discussion on this proposition. Glenbenrough knew the south peak of Corrieandhu; but the short cut to it through the hills from Glenbenrough he was not so sure of: he feared the ride would be too fatiguing for Marion and Julia,—what did they think? A few eloquent looks and half attempts to speak, showed that they thought it would be delightful, and not too fatiguing; and it ended in an agreement that

the appearance or non-appearance of two of the three young men from Glenbenrough at Dreumah next evening should decide it. Shortly after, the neigh of the ponies in waiting gave farewell warning, and the Dreumah party started on their long ride home.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE HILL OF CORRIEANDHU.

And by the watch-fire's glimmering light,
Close by the hunter's side, was seen
A huntress maid in beauty bright,
All dropping wet her robes of green.

All dropping wet her garments seem,
Chilled was her cheek, her bosom bare,
As bending o'er her dying gleam,
She wrung the moisture from her hair.

LORD RONALD'S "CORONACH."

NORMAL MAC ALASTAIR and Roderick Mac Neil, with shouldered guns and knapsacks, left Glenbenrough with the setting sun next evening; and the morning of the 4th September found hearts blithe and strong for a day to be spent on the hills. Suila, Methal, and Kelpie stood

saddled at the door soon after breakfast, and two other ponies had been procured for the cousins. Glenbenrough and Patrick Mac Neil had also steeds, and the whole cavalcade started by eleven o'clock for the meet on the hill of Corrieandhu. Ewen Mackenzie went on foot as guide, Glenbenrough not having gone the route for very many years.

The sky was rather overcast as they started, and the river showed, by its height and turbid colour, that much rain had fallen through the night. They paced the Roua Pass in solitary file, and on reaching the base on the other side, Ewen struck off to the right, and took a rocky path across the face of the country. Indeed the way seemed to depend on the instinct of their guide, for they rode on along barriers of hills and through tracts of heather for nearly two hours: nought seemed living in the wildness save themselves and the grouse, which rose with their hoarse crow of surprise ever and anon around them. Each of the girls had a large tartan plaid

thrown across her knees in riding ; which they found comfortable, for a chill, biting wind came sweeping down the ravines they passed.

At last the base of Corrieandhu was reached, and as they moved round towards the southern peak, shrill cries arose from the heights, and the next moment a troop of barefoot, grey-clad gillies swooped down upon them. They all dismounted, and began the ascent, throwing their plaids across their shoulders, the gillies remaining with the ponies. The gentlemen were already at the peak, and luncheon was waiting : luncheon, with a savage rock for a table, an amphitheatre of hills for a dining-hall, ptarmigan for spectators, and the coming storm for their music.

As they clambered up the bleak mountain, wild gusts drove up hurrying mists, and the wind was piercing ; the girls scattered, and resolutely fought their way onward separately. Glenbenrough, however, kept by the side of Marion, and Patrick Mac Neil helped his sister Julia. Esmé was not so strong as Norah and

Ishbel ; though buoyant when in perfect health, she could not struggle against fatigue as they would : a blonde seldom has the same power of endurance as a brunette ; as the white heather is more delicate than the purple. The rain having saturated the hill, their feet got wet ; Esmé felt a chill sensation creeping over her, and faint with cold, as they climbed higher and higher into the mist, she wished for a strong arm to help her.

At last the summit was gained : Esmé stood on the edge of a precipice, on a crag forming part of a circular declivity of rocks that went down sheer and abrupt on every side to its base, on a round plat of heathery grass at the bottom : this was the edge of the hollowed peak of Corrieandhu, one of nature's most fantastic freaks in the Highlands. From far beneath the blue-grey smoke ascended from two huge fires burning in the clefts of rocks ; a tent constructed of birchen boughs and plaids stood near, and tartaned gillies and shaggy ponies were grouped around : it was one of the

wildest, and most striking scenes Esmé had ever beheld. The mist hung like a curtain over the mouth of this huge rocky well, but all was clear within. Soon Esmé's eye caught Normal's well-known figure scrambling up the rock, followed quickly by Marchmoram and Harold; and when they reached the summit, Glenbenrough and the other girls were standing there, with kindling eyes and heightened colour.

Marchmoram exclaimed against the treacherous climate of the north, as, almost without waiting to exchange salutations, they all began the rugged descent together; for the quicker they could reach the rock-bound shelter far below, the better. Esmé took Normal's hand; he wound her plaid tightly round her, and, bearing her strongly along, they half slid, half ran, to the bottom. There, they found luxury, warmth, and comfort. Within the tent were seats cleverly made of elastic heather and plaids; a table having been formed of stones piled in a square. Soon, from the blazing fires without, were carried by the Englishmen's valets, Gupini and Greaves,

hot soups, amber jellies, basted venison, truffled capons, hot-house fruits, and sparkling champagne.

The girls laid aside their wideawakes and plaids, the gentlemen followed their example, and the party drew up to the lowly table. Mr. Auber was not there: in returning from shooting the day before, he had slipped on a stone and strained his knee, and so was obliged to remain inactive at home. The party was quite as merry as that one at the falls of Aultva. Mr. Marchmoram was in spirits, with a cordial smile and look for all: his energy and tact made him matchless as a host. Glenbenrough enjoyed this strange scene, contrasting it with the times when he and Sir Alastair used to make this rocky hollow a sleeping lair, when out in their nightly watching of the deer. The sport had not been good that morning: Normal had shot a young stag, and Roderick wounded a hind; but Marchmoram had missed a right and left shot in the pass of Stronichie.

The party might have sat at their feast for

nigh an hour, when the curtain of the tent was lifted, and Ralph, the head game-keeper, put in his head, beckoning to Marchmoram, who rose and left the tent. In a few moments he returned, looking grave; his lip had its look of decision, as he said,—

“The gillies are afraid of a September storm, Glenbenrough; and, I think, if you come out and take a look at the sky, you will agree with me that the sooner we get to Dreumah the better. The ponies are in waiting; but to attempt riding back to Glenbenrough would be impossible, for by the time you were on the Roua Pass, the wind would likely have strength to send horse and rider over into the river: we are but three miles from Dreumah.”

Glenbenrough hastily left his seat, and the other gentlemen followed him. Opposite where the tent stood was a huge gap in the solid rock, and, stepping through it, a rugged tract of heather was seen, that wound among the surrounding hills, beyond which lay the lodge of Dreumah. To retrace the route to Glenben-

rough, the circuit of Corrieandhu must have been made ; or they would have to climb up the steep sides of the hollow, and descend the hill to where they had first dismounted. The ponies of the young ladies stood now with other ponies at this gap, all crouched and huddled together in an uneasy way. The sky was of a leaden-blue colour, and a sighing, low, wailing sound came fitfully and mournfully over head ; while from crevices of the hills a sort of misty smoke curled upwards. Glenbenrough knew well that Marchmoram should be obeyed, and there was hurrying to saddle, mount, and depart.

Esmé had looked pale during lunch ; she smiled and joined in talk with the merry voices, but it was evident she had been chilled by the blast during her solitary ascent. Norah and Ishbel had flushed in the subsequent warmth, but a hectic spot burnt bright on Esmé's cheek : she did not look well. In the first scramble of getting ready, Marchmoram had turned to her, and, in a low hurried voice, desired her to

reseat herself in the tent, and not move until he fetched her: he would take care of her.

Glenbenrough and Marion Mac Neil rode off from the gap, a couple of Dreumah gillies walking beside them; Norah followed; Harold, who had assisted in fastening on her plaid, sprang on a pony and rode at her side. Ishbel remained seated, and was among the last to leave with Esmé, Normal, and Marchmoram. It was momentarily becoming darker. Marchmoram turned to Normal and abruptly desired him to ride on with his cousins; but Normal sprang to the tent, where Esmé was sitting with her plaid wrapped round her.

“Come, Esmé,” he exclaimed, “you will come with me.”

“Mr. Marchmoram desired me remain until he should fetch me, Normal: if you will take care of Ishbel, I am sure he will follow immediately.”

“Do you choose so?” he cried in a tone of bitterness. “He is stronger, then, than I on the hill, as well as more conversible in a boat. Go, then!”

“No ; wait, Normal ! come you also.”

“Not to be put under marching orders by him !” Normal exclaimed, running out, at the same moment that Marchmoram entered.

Marchmoram looked excited, with his bright hawk eyes and compressed thin lips. Hurriedly he took Esmé’s hand, led her out, and placed her on her pony ; taking the bridle in his hand. Scarcely had they passed through the gap than, with a shrill, whistling shriek, rushing on came the northern blast, eddying round and round. The tent fell with a crash, burying the wrecks of the lunch ; and the wind, catching plates and knives and forks, hurled them up into the air along with the burning wood from the fires. A pony, still standing in the hollow, was carried off his feet, and rolling over, fell with a groan.

Normal had mounted his pony, and Ishbel was calling to him to come to her. Mr. Marchmoram evidently intended to walk, as there was no pony in waiting for him. A second shriek of the tempest heralded the hurricane ; the blast

swirled in their faces, and the winds met to do battle on the hills.

Esmé was deadly pale. Ewen Mackenzie stood by, with the swarthy Gupini, whose restless eyes just gleamed above a foreign looking cloak, drawn over his head and shoulders. On the first gust Ewen rushed from the Italian's side to seize the bridle of Esmé's pony. She saw Gupini laugh disagreeably, as Marchmoram, calling loudly to Ralph, desired him to lead the pony, and, with irritable gesture, struck Ewen's hand with his hunting whip. The Highlander glared on him, and almost shouted “O' Fuathach gu Siorriuth!”*, then joined Normal and Ishbel as they advanced, and rode on.

How that dreary ride was passed Esmé scarcely knew, except that Marchmoram's strong arm wound round her waist saved her from falling, as they plunged and waded on, knee deep, through the heather, over rock and treacherous moss, and enveloped in dense mists. The wind, driving sleet and rain, swept past, and terrified

* Oh, hatred to you eternal.

game fled as they approached ; the mountain torrents, now swollen into floods, rushed roaring down the heights, deluging the way before them. Esmé's hair had fallen loose upon her face and neck, and streamed in the blast ; her eyes were closed, and she leant her head on Marchmoram's shoulder. She had faced many a Highland storm in winter, but she had never before succumbed like this : she felt as if her spirit was about to take flight on the winds—she thought she was dying. At last they emerged from a gorge, and the lodge of Dreumah lay within a hundred yards of them.

“Cheer up, Esmé,” Marchmoram said, “you are home.”

Those were almost the first words he had spoken ; and his clear, bracing voice acted like magic : she felt strength imparted to her. The secret influence of his indomitable force of character was strong on her impressible temperament : his voice thrilled, whereas Auber's soothed

Esmé felt fast reviving as she was lifted off

the saddle, and she walked into the lodge. Ishbel ran to her from the sitting-room.

“Oh, Esmé, how thoughtful of Mr. Marchmoram to have despatched a gillie to Glenbenrough, while we were at lunch, for change of dresses for us: imagine his thinking of it. He foresaw that we must come here and get wet before our arrival.”

Norah was seated *en déshabille* in the room which had been prepared for them, and Esmé, having been disrobed of her damp plaid and dress, lay down; warm wine was brought to her, which she drank, and then fell asleep. When she awoke, almost all feelings of illness had passed off; her colour and her eyes were bright as in the morning: she felt ashamed of the faintness that had overcome her. How could she boast of Highland strength again? But she would show them the elasticity of it.

Dinner being served, the dark red curtain was drawn across the windows. The rain and winds still beat and howled, but vainly: the fiercer the better now, since it heightened the sense of

luxurious security, and the wilder they raved, the sooner must they be exhausted. The Glenbenrough party would not take their homeward way that night until the weather permitted. A September storm in the Highlands is but transient in its severity; and probably the moon would in a few hours rise smiling on earth and sky at peace.

Mr. Auber laughingly congratulated the Miss Mac Neils on their day's adventure; and the various stories of their scrambles when riding home made every one laugh at his neighbour. Glenbenrough was declared winner of the race; a sweepstakes must be subscribed: Norah's pony, Kelpie, had taken a leap which had so astonished Harold, that he allowed his old steed to stumble into a heather hole, which sent himself a flying leap over his horse's head.

Esmé rather blushed when Mr. Auber asked her how it was she allowed Suila to be so much in the rear; ere she could reply, Marchmoram answered shortly that he was to blame, as, being Miss Esmé's guide, and on foot, he retarded her

progress. Esmé was seated on Mr. Auber's left hand, at the foot of the table ; her father sat on the other side of her, and the small sitting-room looked bright in the light of sunny faces and wax-tapers. Yet there were two present who seemed in shadow. Marchmoram was absent and abrupt in manner ; he looked round from the head of the table, spoke or listened in a desultory way, bit his lip, and in short was in one of his peculiar humours. Normal, who sat next his cousin Norah, was absolutely silent ; his brow was knit.

As the conversation became general, Auber lowered his voice and addressed Esmé.

“ Do you know, Miss Esmé, you much reminded me of one of your own water-lilies, when you arrived to-day.”

“ I was wet and pale, Mr. Auber,” she replied, smiling.

“ Yes, you were like her in the Scotch ballad I read the other day at Glenbenrough :—

‘ Her seymar was the lily fair,
And her cheek the moss-rose in the shower,

And her voice like the distant melodye
That floats along the twilight sea.
She loved to haunt the lonely glen,
And keeped far from the haunts of men ;
Her holy hymns, unheard to sing, :
To suck the flowers and haunt the spring.”

Esmé blushed, and said, “Often in summer I have felt overcome by heat, and have laid me down to sleep on the sunny rocks ; but I never before felt from cold as I did to-day : it was faintness I suppose. I never saw any one faint, and should dread it in my myself, or another, almost as much as death.”

“Had you fainted, Marchmoram would have restored you quickly, I have no doubt,” Auber said with a smile: “it is such a common occurrence with our countrywomen. Few spend a season in London without exhaustion ; for excitement and fatigue tell equally. When sleep is denied to nature, she sends its cold sister to call for it, with swoonings and faintings.”

Excitement ! ah, thought Esmé, how it must run its course of fire round London’s highest

circles, where minds like these give the tone to society. Auber was one of its stars, and as she talked, or listened to him, her imagination lived and revelled in elevated thoughts of poetic beauty, clothed in language befitting them. His light alone was sufficient illumination to her; but what must those feel who moved in spheres where many such stars shone together? Oh! what life, thus to enjoy the light of intellect and genius. But there are few like Esmé in those gay circles where Auber shone.

Auber, in London, was but one of its agreeable and polished men; here, in this Highland shooting-box, his refinement and intellect were valued intrinsically. Each of his perfections was appreciated. As he talked, Esmé felt herself in a state of fascination. Her secret aspirations, her mental cravings, were gratified. Auber touched the spring of her emotions, and evoked the music of her hidden thoughts. He had understood her at first sight. He went into an analysis of her feelings, and touched

with burning words on the dread power of passion. Esmé had long thirsted for converse like this: she knew many men in the Highlands, and liked some much; but she had never met with one like this, whose polished manner and tact (the grand secret, after all) flavoured everything he did or said. She was understood, and she felt that she might speak from her struggling soul, and gaze up into his earnest eyes for enlightenment and sympathy.

Marchmoram rose, and drew aside the red curtain from the window: Glenbenrough was anxious to be gone. The angry winds were hushed, the sky was calm, the moon was sailing mournfully through clouds of black and silver, and water-drops glistened tearfully over the face of the earth: a gloomy stillness prevailed.

The girls exchanged their dresses for the riding skirts, which had been dried; and the gentlemen brought forth plaids and deer-stalking cloaks, which were donned by the fair travellers. Esmé stood by her pony, as March-

moram threw over her a grey poncho ; he fastened it with a pin which glittered in the moonlight. She asked him what it was ? he answered,

“ It is the lightning gem. You are superstitious, so you must ever wear this when you ride at night. I will teach you what it means some other time.”

She saw in daylight that it was an opal, a beautiful one, rich in the rarest rainbow hues of one of the most perfect stones that ever left its Mexican mine. That opal became to Esmé as a loadstone.

Auber and Marchmoram sat opposite each other after dinner on the next evening. Harold had quitted the room. Auber’s head was thrown slightly back, and a dreamy, half-roused smile played on his face as he spoke.

“ Yes, I think I have found a jewel to admire among the rocks.”

“ And admiring it, do you think of wearing it ?” Marchmoram asked.

“ Yes ; carry it tenderly in my bosom while

here, and lay it back in its native casket when I leave."

"Untarnished?" Marchmoram pursued, with a slight twitch on his lip, and looking full at his friend.

"Untarnished? well, I hope so. The change in our programme this season, Godfrey, has been capital. There is originality in our intercourse at Glenbenrough; and the days spent there, and by the Mac Neils here, suit my constitution exactly. Not being so young or robust as you and Harold, I find the deer revenging themselves: by Jove, I was stiff that first week!"

"Yes," Marchmoram replied, speaking in his usual voice of quiet energy, "the society of the Mac Neils is better than the excitement of sport, which you and I only follow for the sake of the air here; and there is that intellectual little roe deer, whom one can follow from rock to rock, enjoying converse and exercise simultaneously."

"I should like to see these little Highlanders placed where any latent *gaucherie* of manner,

if it exist, must needs show itself," Auber said. "Ignorance of conventionality, I think, there must be: but I question whether it would be betrayed. I can fancy that young Esmé coming upon the world suddenly like a young fawn, in some open glade, raising her head startled, and then, looking round in graceful amazement, turn bounding back to her hills again."

"Aye," retorted Marchmoram bitterly, "you would show her evil, no doubt. Auber, your conscience, man, carries weight well."

Auber looked up with a smile, half contemptuous, though placid. "Why, Godfrey, have I very far outrun you? Our friendship and mutual confidence have lasted a pretty fair part of our lives."

"I introduced you to Glenbenrough," Marchmoram replied in a low voice, as Harold emerged from his room in his smoking jacket. Harold heard this concluding sentence, and exclaimed, as he threw himself into an arm-chair,

"The Miss Mac Neils on the tapis? I can't tell you how I admire them! they are so fresh

in beauty and manner—natural ladies—free from all fine ladyism. Miss Mac Neil at Almacks would look almost as *distinguée* as Lady Ida Beauregard: I am confident of it. She is quite as fine a woman, but unconscious. She is a rose of the wilderness, whom diamonds would set off as well as dewdrops."

"Bravo, Harold!" cried Auber. "Well, you may be right. I have no doubt Miss Mac Neil, in length of pedigree, considers herself quite on an equality with Lady Ida; and that goes wonderfully far in enabling a woman to acquit herself: dignity is proper pride, and nature often goes as far as tact."

"Which of the Mac Neils do you admire most, Harold?" asked Marchmoram.

"Miss Mac Neil, I think: she stamps the family. She has such ease of manner, and is so pretty. I can scarcely believe her home education to have been wholly at Glenbenrough."

"Do you not admire the blonde, then?"

"Yes; she may be certainly more striking than her elder sister: she has rare eyes and hair. They

are totally different; and, I am sure, their characters are as dissimilar: I might say the one was born under a comet, the other under a fixed star. Norah belongs to the latter, steadily bright and beautiful; but Esmé Mac Neil is like a comet, uncertain in appearance, erratic in her course, and, perhaps, dangerous."

"How do you infer the latter?" Marchmoram asked.

"Well, by her eyes, very much. There is a world of passion in that blue: her very look denotes impulse, and we all know what mischief that may bring. However, there can't be much scope for it in these far-off Highlands."

Marchmoram and Auber made no reply, for the entrance of one of the valets with coffee interrupted the conversation; and, when again resumed, it opened in a very different direction.

Auber took up the game book, and began adding leisurely some items; Marchmoram took up a French novel, which he soon appeared to be intently perusing; Harold pulled out a packet of unopened letters from his pocket, and

proceeded to open, read, and muse over them, between soothing puffs of his cigar. He hastily glanced at the two, which were merely thanks from town acquaintances for boxes of grouse sent. He slightly frowned over the third, which was an ill-spelt production from his old favourite Yorkshire groom, to say he “feared the red mare was in for a bad thrush, she had been lame for a week; and that his old pointer had died at last, after asking-loike to be shot herself for a fortnight back; and that the fesants and partrigs at Harold’s Hall promised to be foine and plenty.” He then opened his cousin’s letter, the fashionable Lady Ida Beauregard.

Basil Harold was a Yorkshireman, owner of Harold’s Hall and all its domain, one of the richest spots in that rich county—both as regards rental and scenery. His mother and Lady Ida Beauregard’s had been sisters: they were the Ladies Emma and Ida Sefton, daughters of the sixth Earl Trevor. The former had married Mr. Harold of Harold’s Hall, M.P. for York; and the latter became tenth Duchess

of Brittonberg. These sisters became mothers, each of an only child. Lady Emma Harold, the elder, had married some years before the Duchess, and her son was first born. Her health was delicate ever after, and the fifth year after his birth she died. Mr. Harold mourned with grief more like a widow's than a widower's. He had been a domestic Englishman, and that means one of the best and tenderest of husbands. His life and happiness were bound up in his wife's; he had loved and nursed her to the last, and refused to be comforted. He did not like to hear the tones of little Basil: they were so thrillingly like his mother's; the child's laugh, borne in at the open window, made him shrink, and excited his nerves.

The Duchess of Brittonberg arrived, and took little Basil to Britton Castle: he was her son-nephew, her pet, and Ida's playmate; and tenderly, luxuriantly, were the little ones reared. Five years more passed, when Mr. Harold, who had been in delicate health, died; and ere Basil's tenth birthday had passed, the Duchess died also.

The Duke mourned for her almost as keenly as Harold had done for his wife, but with grief of a different kind. Mr. Harold, who was weak, had feebly prostrated himself. The Duke was made of other stuff: he would battle with his sorrow: he would shake off the depression.

Basil being ten years old when his father and his Duchess-aunt both died, the Duke brought him, without a moment's hesitation, from Britton, and left him at Eton; and returning home, gave his little motherless daughter into the doting care of the attached old nurse Max, who watched over her health and growth with most fond and faithful anxiety. The Duke, leaving his daughter to nurse Max and the pure country air, went away to dissipate his grief, seeking excitement in the strife of politics in town. He found it so effectually, that the years flew past in forgetfulness of how they told at Britton; and it was only after five or six years that he suddenly recollected his daughter must have nearly reached her fourteenth year. He then went down to see her.

Nurse Max knew that the great secret of health was open air and exercise ; and Lady Ida was allowed to roam about at will, all the long summer day, and romp at pleasure on wintry nights through the long corridors of the castle. But nurse Max was old and infirm herself, and getting blind and deaf too ; she could not follow the active vagaries of her darling charge, so she got a niece of her own, a fine strong healthy girl with gipsy blood in her veins, to come as companion for Lady Ida : and thus was her theory fully carried out.

Lady Ida grew up straight as a reed, and with the colour of the wild rose. She and the gipsy girl wandered at will, out on the breezy heights, down in the leafy nutting glades ; they leapt their ponies over the crumbling garden walls, and bathed in the large, clear fish ponds. But Lady Ida loved reading as well as riding and running, and she had unlimited choice of the great ducal library. Nurse Max kept the key, and Lady Ida would take it for a week together. What that dangerous key unlocked

to her, and how the stimulative poison extracted from those vast dusty shelves, worked with the naturally over sanguine blood, and the still more uncurbable example of her gipsy friend, perhaps no other heart save Lady Ida's own might know. It became, some years later, closely shut.

When the Duke went down and found his daughter had grown so wild, he received a great shock. He brought her away and sent her to a London school; when, finding that a year thereafter it was necessary to expel her, and that she chose in the meantime to return to Britton, he was in despair about her. He entertained so many conflicting opinions and views of the course to be pursued, that, having other business to occupy his thoughts, there seemed great danger of the time again slipping past as formerly, and the primary object of his cares being forgotten.

But Lady Ida's childish life was coming to its close. On her return from school she became more quiet at Britton; but so did the gipsy

girl: they whispered now, where they formerly laughed. They stole out by moonlight through the wooded parks, and sang love songs to each other amongst the garden's tangled rose beds. Lady Ida kept the library key altogether, and a lamp burned at night at all hours in her room; it was whispered that that lamp shone strangely, too, through unusual parts of the house: lights were seen flickering from high deserted windows, and reflected sometimes along closed-up corridor walls. The steps of Lady Ida and her gipsy friend, though soft and quiet, were very restless; they were heard pacing by midnight as well as by day, and seen out in the moonlight as well as in the sunshine.

It is a critical turning point, that in girlhood's life, betwixt fifteen and sixteen, when romance is ever apt to overpower prudence, and the quick pulse beats too rapidly for the strength: then it requires the vigilant hand and eye of maturer years to restrain and guide. Nurse Max was now wholly unable to rule or remonstrate; her gipsy niece scowled her down in her old arm-

chair and scornfully bade her shut her aged eyes. There came, however, a sudden change.

It was on a sultry August evening, when the woods of Britton were in their greenest glory of leaf, and the birds carolling their most luscious measures of song, that the Duke, sitting down dusty and wearied in his London club, received a clumsy uncouth letter : the hand-writing was large, crooked, and uncertain, like that of a young child or a very old woman. No diplomatic missive could have probed and touched his feelings like that. With an exclamation of pain, he started up, crumpled the letter in his hand, ordered post horses, and paced restlessly until they were ready—forgetting even to send down to the House for “a pair” on an important question coming on that night—and dashed off for his daughter’s country home. What it was that thus speedily roused him to action, prompting him to provide for her education with such energy, no one ever knew.

The gipsy girl was not at Britton when the Duke arrived, and he carried Lady Ida away

with him. Whether it was by influences from without, or from a mental change within, certain it is that from that date Lady Ida began to acquire that quiet stateliness of manner and aristocratic frigidity which afterwards characterised her. And when, a few years later, she graced the London fashionable world, a flower of perfection, delicate in bloom as the rarest exotic, the Duke himself seemed to forget all the baneful past, and to fondly flatter himself that such early neglect had been for the best,—proving his diplomatic foresight of the good effect of early hardening and pure country atmosphere.

Lady Ida's letter to Harold extended to three sheets of note paper, faintly and closely written ; but the decipherer of character in writing would have here found no very significant indication ; however much Harold's amused and interested countenance, as he perused the lady-like hieroglyphics, might have testified to the writer's vivacity. He laughed outright at last, which gave Marchmoram (who had been observing him closely all the time, though apparently only

absorbed in a French novel) the opportunity of looking up inquiringly.

“‘All went merry as a marriage bell,’ Marchmoram: Ida’s description is capital. She says the white rose blushed celestial beneath her veil; and Sir Francis, in his exuberance, drove away without his hat. What fun to see him on his Benedict behaviour by-and-bye! On their return from Rome, Britton Castle will be first on the tour of wedding visits. Lady Sarnton will find Sarnton and Britton most conveniently near for the continuance of her and Ida’s friendship.”

“Lady Ida’s friendship with that little country *débutante* last season was a social enigma to me,” replied Marchmoram. “What sympathy could there exist betwixt her and your high and haughty cousin?”

“Ah! you don’t know Ida. That freshness of the fields and daisies about Lady Sarnton would make her a pleasurable companion to Ida, whose original character was formed in the country, in her girlish days, when the Duke left her

in his widowed home and betook him to the stirring life of politics. I have often smiled at reminiscences of our romping childhood, and wondered at the grace and beauty of that superstructure of manner so speedily raised a few years later, and which has carried her to this high pinnacle of fashion."

"What sort of child was she?"

"The wildest you can conceive. After my poor aunt's death, you know, the Duke left Britton a changed man. He sent me to school, and threw himself into political life ; becoming so absorbed in it, that he actually forgot the living as well as the dead, and for nearly six years his daughter remained under the sole care and guidance of an old nurse, Max—which means that Ida was left to her own—with the companionship of a wild, handsome gipsy niece of the nurse's. What a fine hot-blooded girl that Bella Norris was ! I well recollect the holidays I spent there, and my *tête-à-têtes* with that girl in the woods. I always fancy there must have been some outbreak on her part at last, for I

never could get Ida to tell me her fate: she winced at her name when she grew up, and, despite my curiosity, I never dared urge Ida to gratify it.

Ida, until nearly her sixteenth year, only left Britton once. Did I ever tell you how she was sent for six months to school? One day, in her fourteenth year, the Duke arrived unexpectedly at Britton, and rode to the stable direct, intending to give his horse to a careful groom; for he had ridden the latter part of the journey on a favourite hunter. As he rode into the yard loud peals of merriment from the stables assailed his ears, while clear and high above the rough sounds rose the silvery tones of his only daughter, also in high glee. There the young lady stood, surrounded by nearly a dozen satellites, comprising most of the gamekeepers, grooms, and stable boys of the ducal establishment. One of her little sunburnt hands held the bridle of a tired chestnut pony, to whose saddle girth hung a bloody hare the prey of a gang of mongrel dogs of whom she was the sole

whipper-in, while, with the other, she held back her flowing raven locks away from the smoke which she was puffing out of a short pipe. The Duke uttered an exclamation of mingled astonishment and horror, and Ida, startled, let fall the pipe from her rosy lips, while her colour turned from red to pale.

“Papa, you have been a stranger to me!” she quietly said; as he, with remorse and internal bitterness, desired her to enter the house. She turned and kissed the pony’s head, and, throwing loose its bridle, followed him in, with a firm step and Juno-like bearing.

Within a fortnight, poor Ida found herself under the strict surveillance of the elegant Madame Decherné; taught to dance by Benuto, to play by Cattini, to sing by Madame Allegri, and to smile, talk, and walk, by rigidly polite rule. After six months’ tuition she returned for the holidays to Britton Castle, but at once acquiesced in her recall to London at their close. A few nights after her return, while madame and the many governesses sat engaged at various lady-

like occupations, a large party of the school girls stood chattering round the fireplace, and they prettily recounted the various past holiday exploits: one, telling how she had danced two polkas with the handsome Lord Belgrave at a ball her married sister had taken her to; another, describing her riding lessons on the paternal lawn; and a third how she had daily read and sang to a loved invalid aunt.

“And what was your occupation, Lady Ida?” asked three or four at once.

“Taming a bull,” replied Ida quickly and proudly.

“Oh, mon Dieu! Je n’ai plus d’espoir!” shrieked Madame Decherné.

Soon afterwards Ida left with a final sentence of “hopeless” on her unhappy case of neglected education: but we know how society has reversed that. Ida has often told me that she clapped her hands at every turn of the road which took her further away from London, exclaiming, “I knew I could disgust them! Now I shall become my own governess, when

I choose; as every rational mortal in this world ought to be!"

"And was that shewn in the sequel?" asked Marchmoram.

"I firmly believe it was," Harold replied. "For a year afterwards, while the Duke was consulting and meditating how to introduce her to the influence of Parisian governesses and the companionship of educated girls, Ida lived out her reign of turbulence, and sowed the last of her wild oats. She and the gipsy girl roamed wilder than ever at Britton that autumn, I believe; for I was at the time reading in Wales. Then there was a break up, and a farewell. When next I saw Ida she had become an altered being; she was in London, poring over dry mental lore: she studied six hours a day. Her mind, vigorous as her body, now asserted its powers; everything presented to it was grasped; nothing came amiss, and steadily she trod the path of knowledge. With ripening years, the consciousness of her high birth and beauty was aroused; polished grace, pride, and

dignity, were assumed ; and Ida, the once wild and free, smiled gravely when Mademoiselle Privât told her she might yet be the woman to introduce Spartan manners into polite circles."

"She is a woman of great talent ; proud and cold, imperious and condescending, sufficiently to be very fascinating," Marchmoram said, drily.

"Ida has not what I call an earnest mind," replied Harold. "She has plenty of intelligence, but no intellec^tuality ; some philosophy, but no imagination ; she is enjoyable, but not loveable.

La Voila !"

"Well done, Harold !" exclaimed Auber, laughingly ; "That's a critical analysis of the *belle* of the season. Why there is not a man in town who does not thrill if she honour him with a bow, while you would scarcely do as much for a kiss !"

CHAPTER IX.

HOSPITALITY.

SUNDAY AT GLENBENROUGH.

How many a day in blithe spring time,
How many a day in summer's prime,
I've, sauntering, whiled away the time
 At the back of Benachie!
Oh, Fortune's flowers wi' thorns are rife,
An' wealth is won wi' toil and strife;
Ae day gie me o' youthful life
 At the back o' Benachie!

THE day after the lunch on the peak of Corrieandhu, Normal came down to breakfast with a note in his hand, brought by a gillie from Arduashien: a bearer in these districts is always a much swifter conveyance than the post. He said it was from his father who desired his return that evening.

“It is also time for me to go,” he added, “for my shooting shoes are done for: I gave them to one of those English valets to get dried yesterday, and he must have put them on the gridiron; they cracked from heel to toe when I tried to put them on. They don’t wear brogues at Dreumah, evidently.”

Glenbenrough told him that as he must go, he should arrange with his father to be at the Dual Ghu within ten days: he might send Ewen over in a week to hear the exact date and plans.

“I think you had better not take Ewen to the Dual Ghu, Normal,” Norah whispered; “he is disagreeable to Mr. Marchmoram.”

“No, I won’t,” he replied. “I am afraid Ewen is going to join again in the working of that still, which Cameron the shepherd and old Ian Mohr have again set a-going.”

“Oh! we must tell good Huistan to be on the look out,” said Norah; “it is very rash and very wrong.”

Esmé was at her favourite spring on the river

bank when Normal left; and he found her there, to say good bye.

“ Well, Esmé, not going to ride a bit of the way home with me this time?”

“ No, Normal,” she answered with a smile; “ my climb yesterday was enough.”

“ Enough! Enough in every way? Well, well, we go on then in our different paths. For myself, I prefer a rugged and steep one any day to the smooth slippery flat; but it is diversity that keeps up the interest in our long pilgrimage here: we can do a good deal towards improving our way also, as we may transplant or uproot quite to our own taste.”

“ I don’t like a straight line, however cultured and ornamented, Normal,” Esmé replied, looking up at him; “ though I like going out of the old ways sometimes: we may lose a great deal of unguessed pleasure otherwise.”

“ I agree,” he said; “ but I like a good bold run of it at once, for myself: I am getting tired of home.” And with a sigh, half bitter, half softened, Normal strode away.

Glenbenrough, always hospitable, having heard a few days later that young Lord Harry Temple had been upset in his dog-cart within a few miles from Dreumah, when on the way to Braemorin from his shooting box, and of his being carried to the lodge as the nearest residence, where he occupied Marchmoram's room there with a bruised head, wrote to Marchmoram and entreated him to come to Glenbenrough, where he might shoot unlimitedly over that ground, or his own, as it suited him. A reply came, thanking Glenbenrough for his invitation, and accepting it; accordingly, by dinner time Marchmoram had arrived.

He was under Glenbenrough's roof tree now, and when he retired to his large airy old room that night, he could not but feel himself as much at home as if born a Highland cousin. His host walked with him to the door, after his parting evening tumbler, to see that the fire was burning; and Marchmoram did not know that he had just lost, through their swiftness of foot, a glimpse of Esmé and Ishbel flying past in

their white dressing-gowns, as they rushed back to their own room from poking his wood fire into a blaze.

The Strathshielie party were to leave two days after, as Lady Mac Neil required her children's assistance in entertaining expected guests; so, next day, Marchmoram and the young Mac Neils beat the river woods, and had a battue along the banks: and that night he said good bye to Marion and Julia; for he was to be up by the dawn next morning, deer-stalking on a distant beat. He was far out of sight when the four cousins drove away, waving their adieus to Glenbenrough and his daughters, who were standing on the hall steps.

The family party were now alone. Marchmoram had Ralph, the keeper, and his valet Greaves with him; twice he walked to Dreumah during his stay, but he did not return there until Lord Harry Temple had left, which was in about ten days.

Marchmoram became intimate at Glenbenrough: almost like a brother. He did not shoot much after the first two days; but spent his

time in the open air with the three girls. When Glenbenrough was in his writing-room, or away with his factor at a sheep farm some ten or twelve miles off, Marchmoram was rowing on the river, or scrambling on the rocks, or romping through the garden.

Esmé and Ishbel loved romping—yes, rustic romping: but that word bears very different meanings. Their blood coursed their veins like quicksilver in their bracing native air; they had always been accustomed to activity, and life was buoyant in their limbs. All mountaineers enjoy dancing: it seems necessary to them; and no dancing is more demonstrative than that of the Highlands. Esmé and Ishbel had the national temperament, and were not checked in it either by precept or example; though Norah, being graver, did not share in the wild childish glee which she allowed to them.

Marchmoram joined Esmé in running races down the Roua Pass, and in trying feats of horsemanship. She and Ishbel also played at deer-stalking; circumventing him on the hills while he went in search, and then a flying

pursuit would take place: woe betake Marchmoram if his footing failed in following over rock and water: the ringing laughter would reach Norah where she sat. There was excitement in this, and Marchmoram's eye flashed and darkened in these merry hours: his constitution required impetus, and he enjoyed it here, both morally and physically.

At a little distance from the birchen bower on the river bank, where the fishing-rods were kept, an old grey ruined cross was upreared, which was said to have been erected to an Irish monk who had died there some six or seven hundred years before. Almost at the foot, and under its shadow, a clear spring bubbled up, trickling down to the river. This was Esme's spring: she used daily to go there with a small crystal jug, which she filled for use at dinner. Marchmoram would occasionally go there with her and Ishbel; and much waste was there of that precious water on those days. Esmé prudently changed her crystal jug for one of stone, during Marchmoram's stay, for she feared some accident to the former.

Though Marchmoram thus became admitted intimately into the girlish circle, still there was a certain secret influence of restraint, imperceptible but felt, in their intercourse. When he became excited, his face worked too strongly for merry play: there was too much fire in that sunshine. The nature of the lion showed itself in those gambols: the flash of his eye when baffled, or the energy of his sudden spring, would startle Ishbel with a momentary sense of fear. They felt in their play with him as if he was too strong and powerful to make it wholly safe. Then when he sat in silence in the stillness of evening, they noted his observant eye and compressed lip, and Norah would feel as if she could not too carefully study to avoid aught that might jar his feelings or provoke criticism; while little Ishbel never would have dared a defiant smile after a passing frown on that massive brow. His was the influence of a character made for rule, energy, and command: a character born to achieve success. But as yet the giant Ambition, which was henceforth to command these vassal gifts, sat quietly enthroned,

possessor of that restless soul;—Ambition, the great monarch before whose iron reign fall all tenderer claimants ; the remorseless power which hurries on its possessor, heedless of love, memory, and pity. But though destined to rule Marchmoram, its weaker sister power might make one struggle yet. Two paths, two destinies are open to every one of us at one period of our lives. We all know we shall float into either darkness or light; but we may not know by which current. Sometimes, when too late, we see that there was a moment when our choice should have been different.

Esmé was the one who least felt the outward effect of Marchmoram's influence in its sternness. She was fearless: she knew his strength, but feared it not: she was like Una with the lion. There might also be the mystery of sympathy, which taught her that his strength was health to her, and might be shelter. She learned to delight in his force: in his rugged decision and clear-shaped views. Marchmoram was to Esmé the master mind: with Auber she had felt purely intellectual

delight, but she perceived a sensible difference in communion with Marchmoram.

Sunday arrived. Glenbenrough, in common with most Scotchmen, liked to follow strictly the commandment to rest on that day, and though the parish church was nigh four miles from the house, he and his daughters always walked to service there; or, if it rained, they remained at home, thus avoiding labour to man or beast. This was a bright autumn morning, and they all started after breakfast: the girls carried a Bible each, and they wore bonnets instead of their usual hats or wideawakes. A path branched off from the road behind the house, and led in a devious line across moor and hill, and through birch wood.

The church was also the parish church of Dreumah; but the distance thence being very much greater than from Glenbenrough, the sportsmen rarely, if ever, attended it. It was a small, bleak building, built on the edge of a large sullen loch, on whose banks a few dark pines were scattered. The manse, a thin, cold house, lay opposite. The Gaelic service was not

concluded when they arrived, and the English congregation were assembled in the little church-yard. The women, wrapped in their home-spun blue cloaks, sat on the tomb-stones ; generally with their heads buried in their cloaks, and faces bent reverently to the earth. The men, in their shepherd plaids, stood in groups, silently and abstractedly ; or leant against the walls, their eyes covered by their sun-burnt hands. There was no move, and scarce any attention paid, as the family of Glenbenrough entered the enclosure ; even Florh Mackenzie, who was seated there, only looked up with a quiet passing smile of recognition. The bell tolled forth, and out came the Gaelic congregation. As the party from Glenbenrough turned to enter, Esmé showed Marchmoram a little gold vinaigrette.

“ This is my Sunday luxury,” she said, “ and don’t you be too proud to ask for it by-and-bye. A Highland church, which is never aired, is trying to the nerves, I assure you : I would rather join the free church until they also get into shelter ; for it is better to be out of doors than in.”

Marchmoram agreed with Esmé at a later period, though from a different cause. Dr. Macconochie preached better in Gaelic than in English: he was profuse in verbiage, but frequently misapplied his words painfully; and as he swelled out his sentences, striking ponderous blows upon his desk as he hurled down dogma for doctrine, Marchmoram bit his lip to restrain his risiblility. It is said that, with their Calvinistic tendency, a congregation of the Highland lower classes will benefit by unintelligible enthusiasm in the pulpit; their own strong belief working out some mysterious application; so that the more violent and inflated the delivery, the more do they bow to the exhortation conveyed in demonstrative threats of voice and gesture. Weather-beaten faces of men and women gazed up in reverent awe, while young lads and lasses sat with open mouth and vacant eye, as Dr. Macconochie preached to them.

Miss Christy Macpherson was seated in the gallery, and gazed full upon the Glenbenrough seat near the pulpit. The psalm being given out, a long, low, canine chorus from shepherd's

dogs scattered through the church, arose with the voice of the people, to Marchmoram's horror, and howls in discord mixed with the earnest untuneful singing. The noise was so mixed that a low laugh, which, I am sorry to say, escaped Esmé as she caught sight of Marchmoram's agonised face, was unheard; but Miss Christy saw it, and shook her head in well-timed rebuke, from the gallery.

Service over, there was a small gathering of friendly groups in the churchyard, ere all turned homeward. Norah joined Mrs. Macconochie, and Dr. Macconochie himself appeared, hastily putting on his great coat. He was kindness and hospitality itself, urging Glenbenrough to come to the manse for a glass of wine; but Miss Christy, who came hastening up, changed the invitation.

“ ’Deed, Dr. Macconochie, ye suld tak’ Miss Esmé an’ put her on repentance stool! — to see her laughing at puir dumb dogs for yowling, making a scandal afore the meenister!”

Dr. Macconochie waved his hand: Miss Christy was forward.

“I have no doubt,” he said in a pompous half Celtic-Saxon accent, “if Miss Esmé Mac Neil did amiss, she is penitentiary! We all do amiss: we must all mend our breaches—mend ye your breaches.”

“Ye need na say yon to kilted lads!” said Miss Christy, with a grin.

Dr. Macconochie cast a glance of severe rebuke, and said with asperity, turning also towards Marchmoram, “This is scandal and indecency too.”

Miss Christy reddened angrily. “He’s a rael time server,” she muttered; and shortly afterwards, as the Glenbenrough party were moving off, she maliciously asked, “Is’t true ye’ve got a requisition to the grand living o’ Perth, Dr. Macconochie?”

“Yes, Miss Macphairson, the Lord has called me.”

“Weel, weel,” she answered drily; “but do you ken, I’m thinking if he had called ye frae Perth to Locknamoke here, instead o’ calling ye frae this to Perth, ye wad just never have let on that ye heard him!” Then with a

sardonic laugh she bustled off, leaving Dr. Macconochie confusedly trying to “unfurl” his umbrella for Glenbenrough; who declined it, however. It remained fair, but dark shadows hung over the scenery.

They returned by a different route, over the brow of a heathery hill, and passed close to the free church congregation at their devotions in the open air. The scene was highly picturesque, and Glenbenrough stopped for a few moments. The clergyman, a thin, pale young man, stood on a grassy knoll, and his voice echoed clearly in the hushed stillness around; only broken now and then by a short, nervous cough, as he addressed the people in Gaelic. When the assembled voices rose in the psalm, loud, wild, and irregular, the sound floated up, and, echoed by the rocks and heard through quivering trees, the music sounded grand, and fitting to the worshippers and the day.

This second service had had more vitality than the previous one. Glenbenrough told Marchmoram, as they proceeded, that he hoped the free church would be completed ere the winter:

he, with most other proprietors, had relented and now granted sites. Norah said that, could they choose their pastors, as in church, they would gladly exchange their's for Mr. Stuart: he would likely suit them best; and Dr. Macconochie (did his conscience permit) would be most popular in the free church congregation. Mr. Stuart was a “gentle southern,” and in mind and manner moulded too tenderly to suit the more rigid form of Presbyterianism.

When they reached Glenbenrough, Harold was found in the drawing-room. He said he had walked from Dreumah on a mission of charity, to ask for a book to beguile the tedium of Lord Harry's convalescence. The selection was a difficult one, for few modern volumes ever reached Glenbenrough. As they searched and talked, Esmé told Marchmoram that her three favourite authors—and those she had loved and studied since childhood—were Shelley, Milton, and Shakspeare: strange variations of the highest flights of earthly genius. Marchmoram thought that their influence might be traced in the inner life of their young student.

As Harold walked back in the afternoon, his eyes rested with a strange sort of fascination on the name “Norah Mac Neil” written in the first leaf of a little copy of the “Christian Year,” which Norah had put into his hand along with other books.

Marchmoram was to return to Dreumah; Lord Harry Temple having vacated the Lodge. The day before his return, Harold and Auber met him on the Roua Pass; they shot over Glenbenrough and dined there afterwards. Marchmoram, in his easy intimacy, now seemed almost a second host there; his wishes appeared to influence everything, and his manner had all the implied feeling of being in a second home: with Norah he was scrupulous as ever in strict courtesy and attention, but Esmé and Ishbel he treated more as playful younger sisters.

When with Auber, Esmé’s imagination revelled in pensive sentiment, under the influence of his soft low voice; but in Marchmoram’s society it bounded into life and spirit. Her strength of will and opinion came out to do laughing battle with his, and her ready wit

struck fire against his solid intellect. Every one at table looked up in amused or interested attention, when Marchmoram and Esmé thus encountered; and the excitability of both in argument gave piquancy to the contest, which Auber enjoyed especially.

It was a beautiful night; and Harold and Auber had ordered the dog cart, meaning to return to Dreumah, driving round by the bridge, and, walking across the Roua Pass, meet the “trap” on the other side. Esmé was absorbed, gazing on the moonbeams as they palely illumined her face where she stood at the window. At last she whispered to Norah, and then turning to Marchmoram, asked, in the beseeching voice of a child, if they might not all walk up the Roua Pass with the two gentlemen: she seemed to think assent or refusal lay with him. To have asked Glenbenrough almost any request was to be sure of its gratification. Marchmoram gave one of his half smiles, and she darted to the door, calling out to her father that they were going for a moonlight walk, but his daughters would

be soon back if they met no brownies or bogles on the way.

Auber and Harold were in the hall putting on their stalking cloaks; the three girls quickly covered themselves with plaids lying there also; and then with Marchmoram they all sallied out. Glenbenrough remained by the fire; but half-an-hour later stole out, on tip-toe, and, smiling like a schoolboy at the idea, carried a sheet under his arm, which, when he reached the foot of the Roua Pass, he threw over him, and there stood, like a stone statue amongst the trees, until the return of the party.

The moon lit the path up the hill, and shone so brightly as to show distinctly the hues and tints of purple heather and grey rocks, and the green and amber beauty of the changing ferns. Oh! beautiful and solemn, awful even to sublimity, is a starry night on the Highland hills. Those peaked towers of strength rising like silvered pinnacles in the moonlight, the sheeted torrents clothing their sides with glittering star-sprinkled foam; range upon range of everlasting hills looming one above another with

giant cloud-shadows hurrying past as if on some direful purpose! The eagle with closed eyes rests on the summit, and the deer crouches beneath under the shade of the weeping birches swaying their tendrils with mournful music to the solemn soughing of the stately pines. The precipice of the Roua Pass glowed red as blood in the moonlight, and the water beneath murmured, as it flowed darkly in the shadow of the rocks.

Esmé, with Auber by her side, was last of the group ascending the hill. Marchmoram was in advance, followed by Ishbel; and Norah's white dress fluttered high above, against Harold's dark cloak.

“This is beautiful, Esmé,” Auber said in his lowest softest tone; “but are all your wishes limited to the enjoyment of beauty like this? Have you no farther desires?”

Latterly both Marchmoram and Auber had addressed Esmé, when no third person was present, by her Christian name; and uttered by these men, instead of startling, it gave her pleasure.

“I know no other place on earth save the Highlands,” Esmé said; “and all my wishes beyond it are impossible ones.”

“Tell me them.”

“Well,” replied Esmé, smiling, her blue eyes dilating as she looked up and met Auber’s eager gaze; “I should like the power of invisibility: that I might take wings and fly—seeing, but unseen—where I listed.”

“And what life would you pursue?”

“I fear, a mixed life: I should wish it to be good; but I might encounter evil.”

“To enjoy the power you would be sure to meet evil, Esmé: temptation might be irresistible. I should like to be invisible with you, Esmé!”

As he spoke he lifted the end of her plaid, which had fallen on the path, and while replacing it round her waist, he gave her a momentary pressure. She raised her eyes suddenly to his, and he looked down with a tender depreciation, as he continued speaking.

“Were I to become very ill, Esmé—as I sometimes do—and to lie languishing for pity and a gentle voice, and you were able to act

as if with that power of invisibility, would you come and nurse me and give me sympathy ? You know I never had a sister, and I have no one who would do such a kindness to me."

"Yes, I would come," Esmé answered. She spoke in innocence, pure and stainless as the moonlight streaming on them both ; but her heart throbbed, and she felt a fascinating power in the earnest pleading tone of his voice.

"To me, who have ever trod with restless foot o'er earth's fairest expanse, what a prison, desolate in its grandeur, would the barren heights of Dreumah be, wreathed in their winter snow ; and yet I would be fain to lie bound there—prostrate in strength, suffering in illness, might I but see those eyes of blue beaming on my face, and cool my fevered hand in this : you would teach me to think of heaven, and I would keep you back with me to earth."

He took her hand and drew her near to him. His influence was paramount over Esmé : it spoke in his soft subdued voice, and beamed in the light of his kindling eye. They were on the verge of the Pass. Esmé trembled all over ;

but the next instant she withdrew her hand, and then a blush, deep and burning as sunset glow, suddenly suffused face, neck, and brow, as she saw the stern face of Marchmoram before her: he had turned on the other side of the Pass, and the voices of Norah and Ishbel were heard bidding farewell to Harold. Auber bit his lip; but, quick as thought, he again took Esmé's hand and pressed it, as if parting from her; glancing at Marchmoram with a peculiar look as they passed each other on the narrow path.

In the descent to Glenbenrough, Esmé again was last: she lingered, and walked slowly. Ishbel ran on before, skipping like a playful kid over the rocks; and Marchmoram walked by Norah, but he was silent. Esmé felt that Marchmoram's quick eye was not to be deceived, and that he had seen what had passed between her and Auber: she felt mingled sensations of shame and pride, guiltiness and annoyance; but then she thought Marchmoram would forget it. What did it matter to him? When they reached home she would run up to her own room without bidding him good night.

At the foot of the Roua Pass all three were startled by the dreadful shriek which Ishbel gave as she rushed past the tree where Glenbenrough stood in his sheet; but the groan he attempted broke down in his hearty laugh, and exclamations of “Papa, papa,” from his daughters, showed that he was detected.

Esmé sat in a low chair before the fire in her room, brushing her hair, which hung in a golden shower about her: it curled naturally, and at night she merely braided it back in one thick roll.

Esmé and Ishbel’s rooms, which were small, though on the drawing-room floor, opened into each other, and they were furnished much alike: a low tent bedstead with muslin curtains stood opposite the window, which looked upon the Roua Pass and the strange peak of the Craigchrisht hill beyond. The furniture was old and simple; all the chairs in the room were of different shapes. The toilet table was built into the recess of the window, and an antique fan-shaped looking glass stood on it; presses beneath serving for chests of drawers,

and a low table, covered with a bright coloured plaid, supported their books and desks. The carpets of the rooms were curious and comfortable, being the gift of Florh, who had spun them herself: they were very thick tartan, of the Mackenzie pattern, and soft to the foot as Turkey rug. Esmé had many pictures, principally in water colours, painted by her mother, hung upon the walls of her room; and above the frame of each was a bouquet of heather and deer's-grass, which retain their colour for months at a time. Ishbel also had her walls ornamented with deer's-grass, and the post of her tent bedstead was crowned by a sweet bunch of bog myrtle.

Norah's room, of which she was sole occupant, was on the higher flight; next her's was the apartment her mother had died in, and which Glenbenrough had quitted since that sad event, preferring a room near his study. Norah's room was large and airy, and furnished so as to suit all her tastes. It contained a book-case, and a stand with greenhouse plants stood in one of the windows; prints and paintings,

with a crayon likeness of her mother, adorned the walls; and an old oak cabinet held a stock of comforts and necessaries for the poor. The curtains of her bedstead were curious, being made of silk patchwork, sewn into tapestry devices; the work of the fair hands of old and young ancestors, long, long since crumbled into dust. A screen of beautiful antique workmanship half encompassed the fireplace; and seated within its shadow Norah now sat, buried in reverie. She arose at last, and, taking her candle, went down stairs to Esmé's room. It was late, but a light still streamed beneath Marchmoram's door, which was opposite. Norah sat down by Esmé, and taking the brush from her hand, continued the dressing of her hair for her, while both sisters talked together.

“We shall miss Mr. Marchmoram much when he leaves, Esmé. I did not expect, that first day at Dreumah, that so short a time after we should have become thus intimate.”

“No, indeed! What pleasure we have had since then. I only feel that were life to go always on in such a round, it would satisfy

us too much with the present, Norah. We never held converse with men like these before: young Seatoune, and Comhfern, and Breesah, are all men of family and position, handsome, agreeable, and educated; and yet we would make unfavourable comparisons now.”

“These men, I suppose, have the highest polish that society can give, Esmé; and in thus knowing them, we must feel it to be but a rare and passing pleasure: nowhere else in Scotland could we know men like them; and even in England, depend on it, these men rank high. In the Lowlands, or in an Edinburgh ball-room, how proud we should feel of our handsome chiefs and cousins, and how, in our eyes, they would tower above the every day people there; but here, we find their free born spirits do not bear comparison with the tutored ease of these men, with whom we feel under no restraint, and have more easy enjoyment in their society than in that of men whom we know much better. Did you not feel to-night as if you could have walked on to Dreumah with them, as with brothers?”.

Norah could not see the smile that passed over the face of Esmé (who thought of Auber), as she replied—

“ Yes, when altogether, and at Dreumah, one thoroughly felt this, Norah ; but I think Mr. Marchmoram’s pervading influence creates much of this feeling : he seems always as if we were under his care, and we feel safe in the guardianship of his strength.”

“ He has plenty of strength, social and intellectual : he is a man of decision in all he does or says. I notice it in everything.”

“ Mr. Marchmoram is a man who, I feel sure, intends to rise, and will rise very high some day, Norah. It is evident in every feature, and in his very silence. His mind seems ever active ; and as his mood changes from absence to excitability, the glow of matured thought kindles his eyes with strange light. What fire and energy sparkle there ! Intellect and command are stamped upon his brow ; and his mouth shows traces of ambitious aspirations more than all the other features : it is so proud, so overruling, and yet so reserved. Who can

define the expression of his mouth? Do you know, I fear it: it seems inexorable."

"Esmé, I think you are right," Norah said; and she drew her seat closer to the fire.

The two figures of the girls would have made a pretty picture as they sat, both with their eyes fixed on the glowing embers: Norah's regular features were pale in their composure as she shaded her soft dark eyes with her hand; Esmé, in her loose white robe and golden hair, like a visitant from spirit-land; but her face was not sufficiently peaceful: a bright pink burnt in the cheek, and her eyes glowed with a lurid brightness. She spoke first, after a short silence.

"Have you talked much with Mr. Auber, Norah."

"No: less than with Mr. Marchmoram and Mr. Harold; but I have occasionally heard part of your strange conversations with him. Esmé, dear child, Mr. Auber is a very fascinating man;" and as she paused hesitatingly, Esmé quickly interposed—

"Well, I have not spoken much to Mr. Harold, but I think him charming."

A slight blush coloured Norah's face, as, in her turn, she interrupted Esmé by saying, "We will talk of him afterwards: I want first to give you my idea of Mr. Auber. He is fascinating, and a man of cultivated mind and manners; and he has imagination; but, unless I am deceived, there is very little heart in him. You have drawn Mr. Marchmoram's character from his face, and so I draw Mr. Auber's: there are two aspects to each feature there. I have seen a smile sweet as sunshine pass and leave an expression cold as lead, and one of his impassioned glances succeeded by a look as worn out as that of the most *blasé* man of the world."

Esmé looked up startled. These were new ideas to her. What answer could she give? An unaccountable impulse prevented her contradicting Norah, and yet she could not agree with her. They were silent. At this moment the owls on the old trees in front of the house began shrieking, and the clock struck twelve. Norah arose, saying she feared her fire was out, and went into Ishbel's room; she kissed

her sleeping sister, and sighed. On her returning to go up stairs, Esmé said, with a smile —“Norah, I think Mr. Harold admires you. Marion and Julia thought it also.”

“How could you think so?”

“Why, in one way it would be unnatural if he did not. You know you are pretty; and he evidently likes your society: he seeks it.”

“Oh! he knows I am the eldest sister of the family.”

“And he is the youngest of the Dreumah party! No, that is not it; nor is it because he sees that I am less conversable than you, but it is because he finds that you suit him. With his own truthfulness, and well regulated mind, he can estimate your's. I think one has only to look at Mr. Harold while you and he talk together, to see that his character is one formed on principle. I have noticed that, though he has a keen sense of the ludicrous, and is observant of motive and action, yet he is utterly free from cynicism. His fine tempered smile and thoughtful brow show that he looks honestly and kindly

on the world, and that his mind has been self-regulated by a naturally good disposition.”

“Well, I would have imagined you had been the most in his society ; you speak so fully of him !” Norah said, smiling. “But everything you say, I feel, is borne out. There is a truthful simplicity about Mr. Harold that ‘he who runs may read.’ He is a man of principle—religious principle—I am sure ; and, after all, that is the great point, dear Esmé. Chivalrous honour, unflinching justice, unswerving truth, are good and high qualities ; but they belonged to the stoics : and those who now exercise them without religious principle, are but stoics, and reach no higher than an earth-bound morality. Self-control and spiritual watchfulness are better worth than aught else below.”

“Yes,” said Esmé, thoughtfully : “I admire this abstract truth and goodness, Norah ; but I have not the inclination to approach it. I close my eyes, and with bowed head steal silently, reverently past the pure light of religious principle. I love it, but I am too feverish to approach that light. The leaping flames of

wayward genius flicker before me, and on I fly attracted, feeling an impetuous impulse to throw myself headlong into the consuming fire. My nature, dear Norah, is so different from your's. But it is less happy for me, Norah. You will be within some day, while I stand saddened as the Peri without."

Esmé ceased, and an indescribably mournful smile was on her face. Norah's eyes filled with tears as she turned and gazed on her sister.

"The time is coming, I trust, dear Esmé, when strength will be given. You are yet young and impulsive; but years will bring the strength which then will carry you on higher and higher towards that light before which all lesser lights are dimmed. Then, Esmé, all terror will be allayed; but not till then. And then will you rise and behold calmly the dazzling light of genius, and approach it, without being blinded."

"Yes, Norah," said Esmé, with sudden earnest tone; "I know it. Without religion, intellect but flies blindfold." Then in a low

voice she added—"Wit, brilliancy, talent, ye are nought."

"Esmé, there is no 'nought.' We must answer for our talents; because no one with talent but has aspirations: this thirst was given us to reach and compass the highest good. There never yet existed an intellectual mind which did not feel that work was to be done while it is called to-day, and that all other paths are but devious and dangerous, unless they lead into the narrow way."

"Oh, dearest Norah!" cried Esmé with a burst of feeling, and burying her face in her hands, "this imagination, this heart of mine; it is so wild, so wilful! I am untrained!—No, not untrained: 'tis my fault alone. I have been as carefully guided as you—we have both been carefully guided; but I am the wild gourd, while you have grown up the fruitful vine. I have high aspirations; but I cannot pray rightly: I wander along bewildering paths, fascinated by the excitement: I am but as a cloud driven by the wind."

"Esmé, darling," Norah said tenderly, "I

know you full well. Time, which matures all, will be the great restorer.”

“ Unless time be given,” Esmé rejoined, “ I shall be drifted into darkness.”

“ Time will be given,” Norah said earnestly; and rising slowly she approached the window, and called Esmé to look at the shooting stars traversing the firmament. In a few moments they smilingly began “ wishing”—each wish to be mentally formed and completed ere the light of the shooting star was extinguished: it must be, literally, “ quick as thought,” or it would ever remain ungratified. At last Norah turned to go to her room; she looked back from the door and said,

“ Esmé, you remember the French saying, ‘ Il y a des gens dégoutants avec du mérite, et d’autres qui plaisent avec des défauts ! ’ I find it useful for myself, from my being apt to disregard it; but though safe with me, it does not do for you to act on its truth too much.”

“ Ah ! ” replied Esmé, smiling; “ I am afraid I have generally dwelt on the last fact too much.”

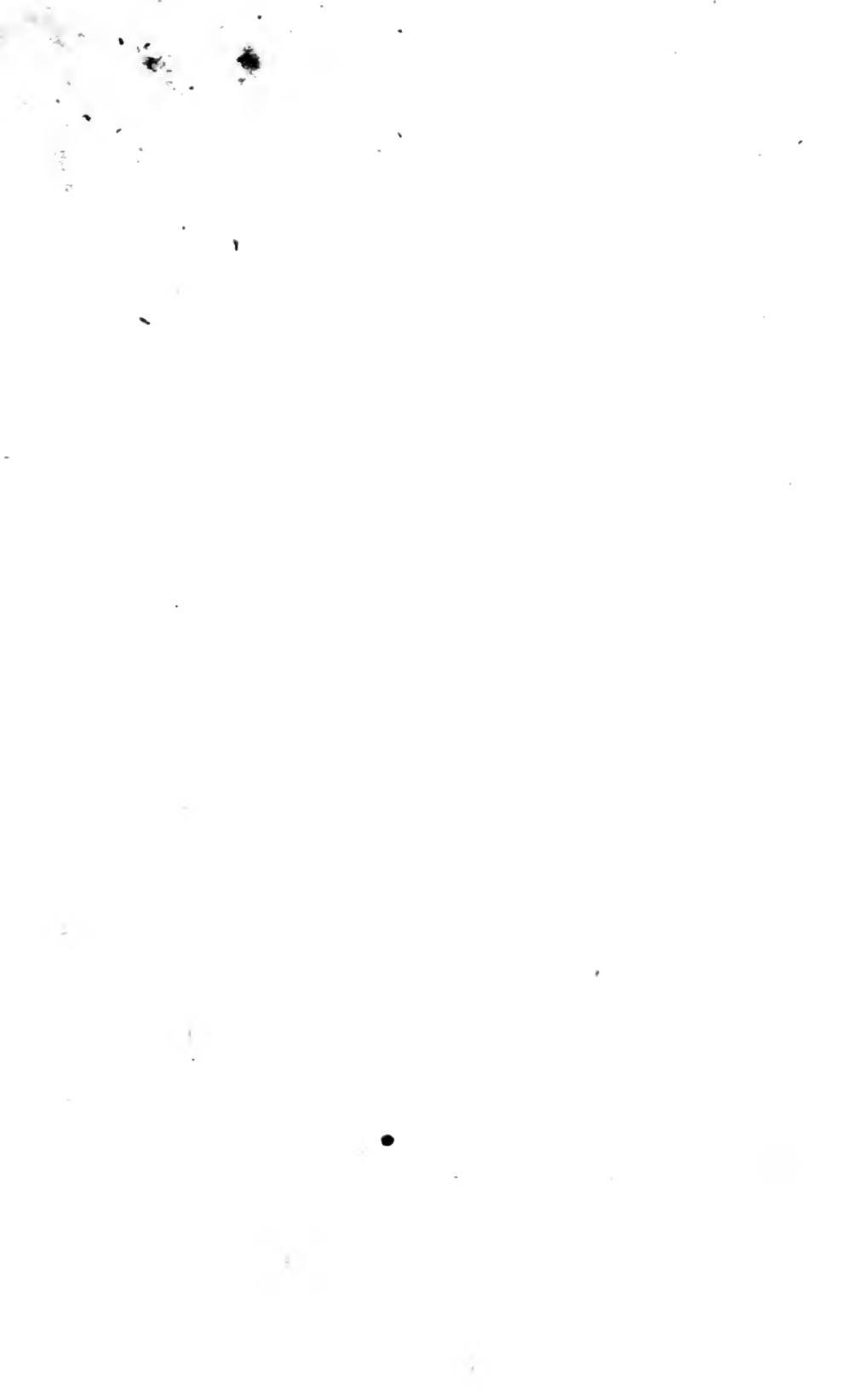
The sisters exchanged good night. But for some time later, and long after Norah had fallen asleep, a small, restless footfall might be heard in Esmé's room, and a low voice occasionally murmuring incoherent sentences : such as,

“Norah, why don't we speak thus oftener ?”
—“Darkness, darkness !”—“Godfrey Marchmoram !”—“Oh, Normal ! we have dwelt so long on the same page ! what is to be first—what last ?”

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